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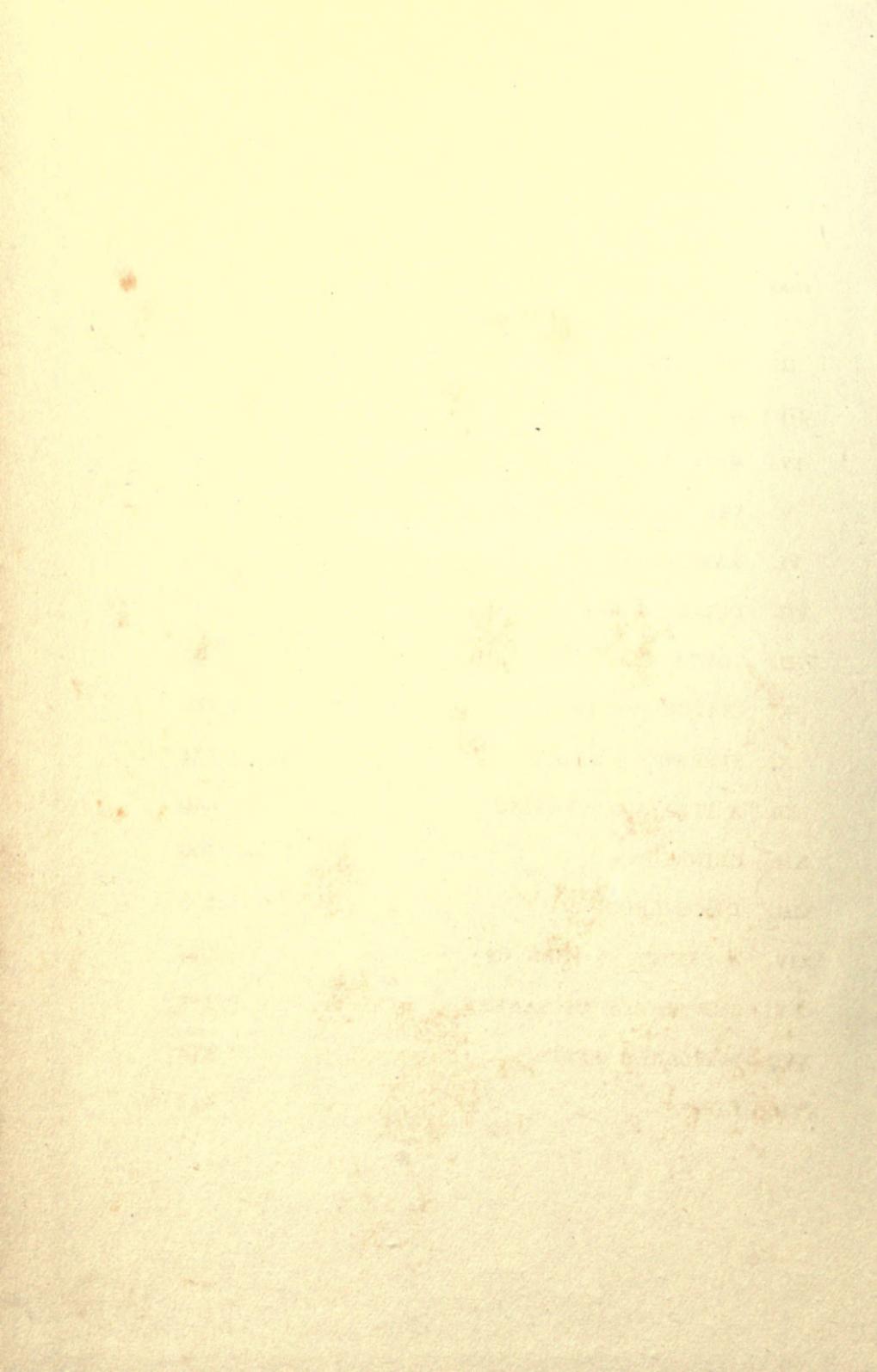


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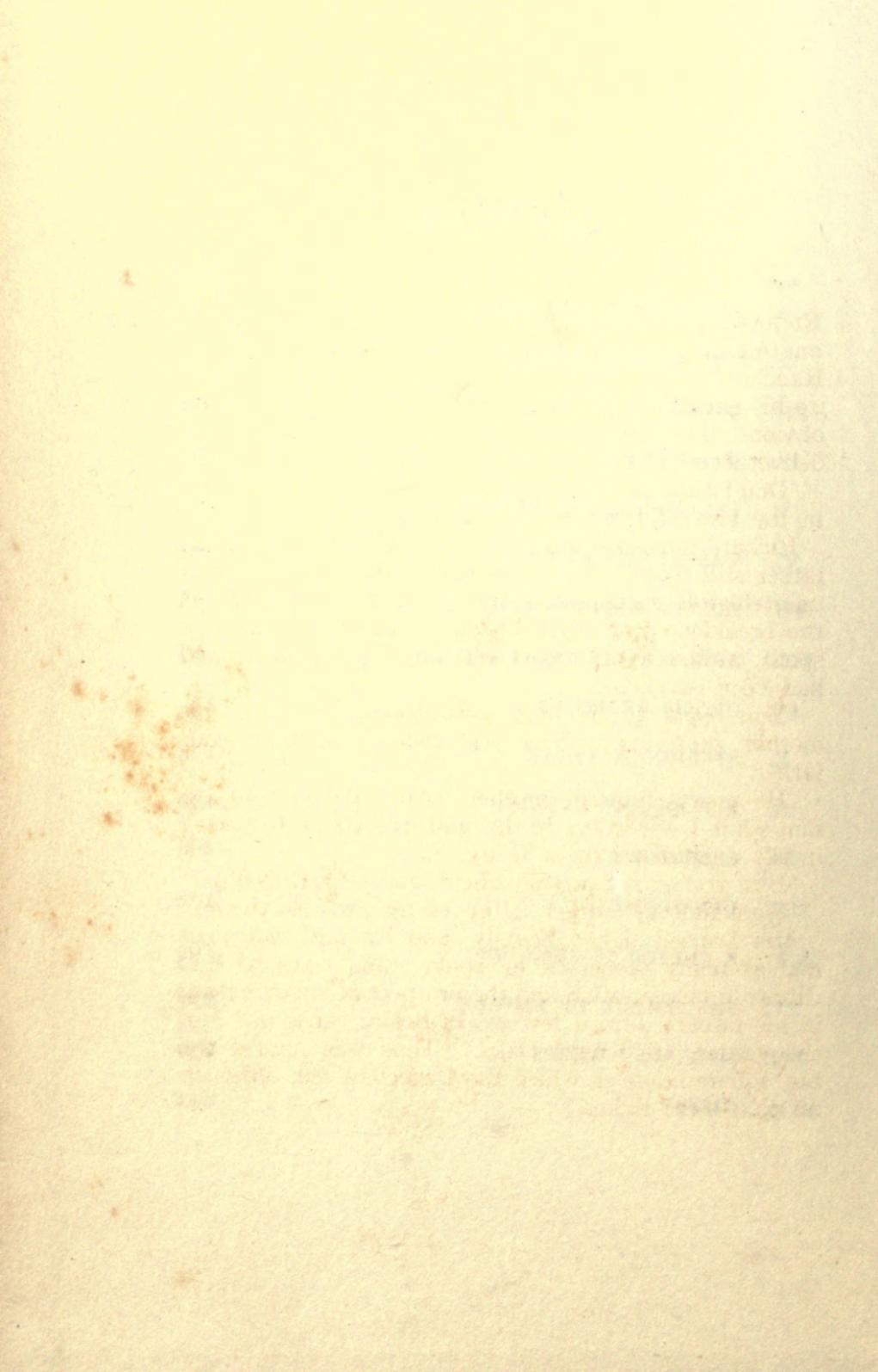
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TO THE
MEMORY OF MY FATHER



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CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN TRADITION

RICHARD DARNELL quietly announced after breakfast one morning that he had accepted an appointment in Hanchow. After he had spoken, he continued to fold up his napkin with a rather too elaborate ease. It was obvious that the announcement and its method of deliverance had both received considerable forethought.

'Don't be an ass !' snapped his father, who was never in the best of tempers at breakfast.

Richard shrugged his shoulders, which annoyed his father still more. The older man, uttering a guttural, unintelligible exclamation, rose from the table and left the breakfast room with the air of one whose meal is spoilt, although his repast was already complete, and had been excellent.

'You *ought* to be more considerate, Richard,' his mother protested. 'You are always upsetting your father.'

'He upsets himself, mother. All I did was to tell him what I was going to do, and instead of discussing it like a normal human being . . .'

'But you're not *serious* about going to Hanchow?'

'I am indeed, mother. I'm fed up with Northboro'.

Mrs Darnell sighed heavily, and Richard, who had had as many scenes as he could stand since he had thrown up his position and the prospect of a partnership in his father's firm a few weeks before, went out into the garden of 'King's Oaks.' Thus was named the big, square house in which the Darnells lived, although no oaks were there.

It was a hard house, and Richard regarded it and the accurate lawn in front of it without enthusiasm or affection, for all that it had sheltered three generations of his family. There was a complacency about the house which maddened him. It seemed to look down on him contemptuously, as if it knew that it would outlast him as it had outlasted his fathers.

As far as Northboro' is concerned the Darnells originated in one Jacob Darnell who came, vaguely, like most people, from Scotland. At any rate it is certain that he prospered; and all that is mortal of him is depressed by the largest and ugliest tombstone in the town cemetery.

In the sixty years which followed Jacob's irruption into Northboro', the Darnells developed an intense pride in the town which was springing up, in ugly growth, around them. Gradually they came to regard the part of the world outside Northboro' with a mixture of superiority and suspicion; consequently, when Jacob's grandson announced that he had accepted a position in Hanchow, that he was deliberately, of his own volition, *leaving* Northboro', the family (excepting his immediate relatives) was inclined to be mirthful.

Hanchow was in China !

Of course he wasn't serious. Darnell said so to Darnell, with quiet conviction.

China !

He had always been a little wild; that unfortunate affair with the girl in the tobacconist's shop, which Uncle George had only smoothed over with the greatest difficulty, came back to their minds. But a girl in a tobacconist's shop was understandable, it might happen to any one . . . this 'China business' was altogether different.

To the Darnells it was some vague, monstrous, unknowable land where men wore absurd pigtails and

where women's feet were deliberately deformed; where people lived on birds' nests !

The whole idea was laughable !

And—to strike a more serious note, as the Darnells always did if they possibly could—it was a heathen country. Unchristian. Missionaries had to be sent there.

Even Richard's father could not be persuaded, for a while, to take the matter seriously. He expressed the considered opinion that his son was a damned young fool, which, if not particularly helpful, had the virtue of being definite. The uncles, in their varying degrees, agreed with the father, and pooh-poohed the idea firmly.

Birds' nests, forsooth !

They were ponderously witty and were each certain that if Richard had been *their* boy . . . and so on, in the manner of uncles.

But Richard was twenty-five and had a little money of his own; gradually it dawned on his relatives that he meant to go. Openly and without reservation he asserted that Northboro' was a *hole* . . . that it narrowed a man.

As if it were possible to conceive more broad-minded people than the Darnells ! They had always boasted of their broad-mindedness. Scandalised Uncle Bernard reminded Richard that only recently he (Uncle Bernard) had taken the chair at a lecture given by a *Nonconformist* minister. . . .

The Darnells were reduced to italics, or outraged silence, but in the end the Black Sheep had his way, as Black Sheep usually do.

His father and mother saw him off at the station, and a sense of impending calamity brooded over the farewells. His father *hoped* that he would be all right.

His mother wept. . . .

He succeeded in keeping a bravely cheerful front to his family, but the conscious loneliness which came to him when he had left them behind was a little unnerving.

He sat facing the open window, and the sting of the wind brought a glow to his face. He was a good-looking boy, with a firmness of jaw and cleanliness of skin which promised well. There was an alertness, a brightness, about him which explained why he had insisted, in the teeth of family opposition, in leaving the track trodden so faithfully and successfully by his fathers.

The arrangements for the journey had been made by his new firm and went as smoothly as a conducted tour. His last memory of England was a hurried blur of ships and warehouses, and a few hours later Richard Darnell was watching his country sink slowly into the night. He walked up and down the deck. Overhead were the glittering stars; around him the distance and silence of the sea. He thought more kindly of Northboro' than he had done for many weary months . . . out of the blue night little kindly memories came to him.

Life on a steamer was too enormously new for Richard to find the time heavy on his hands during the early days. He made several friends, and one of them, a small, pessimistic fellow with very blue eyes, was able to tell him something of the city to which he was going.

He thought still more kindly of Northboro'. . . .

Towards the end of the voyage the monotony of ship life had its inevitable effect, and he reached Hong-Kong anxious for the end of his journey. He had to wait ten days there, however, for the coasting steamer which would take him to Hanchow, and for long hours wandered about the town, gazing at its strange people

and its funny little shops, steeping himself in the riotous colour of the place, a colour which soon dominated the gray memories of Northboro'.

His first glimpse of Hanchow gave him the impression of a low, monotonous town with green hills rising beyond. But as he came nearer the impression weakened . . . until it disappeared, and he saw that the city was clustered picturesquely round one side of a great harbour made by the mouth of a river.

As soon as the steamer was berthed the agent of Richard's firm came aboard. He was a cheerful little man, and he talked unceasingly as he and Richard were on their way to what was called the White Quarter, the roomy bungalows of which contrasted favourably with the crowded native streets through which the two men had passed.

Darnell shared one of these white bungalows with a colleague. They had three native servants between them; silent, respectful servants who sprang out of nothingness if one clapped for them. It was a delightful experience, for example, to clap for a servant to take one's boots off; in Northboro' one even cleaned one's own boots.

There were only four English ladies in Hanchow, and their homes provided what social life the community knew. Mrs Cox, the wife of the firm's agent, kept a motherly eye on her husband's young men, and they were frequently guests at her home. It was there, some six months after he came to Hanchow, that Richard first met Luen-chi, of whom he had previously heard a great deal. The Chinese, unless rumour was exaggerating even more than she usually did, was extremely wealthy; certainly he did a very big business with the firm. The agent introduced the two men, and Luen-chi looked at the young Englishman through

half-closed eyes. He belonged to the modern China, to the China which sends its children to schools wherein they are taught European languages, but, during his first conversation with him, Darnell discovered that Luen-chi's modernity was oddly blended with the ancient wisdom of his race.

From the first meeting Luen-chi appeared to like Richard, who had sufficient imagination to follow the other's primitive English. He asked many questions about Darnell's country, and from these questions Darnell inferred an admiration for England. But what pleased the younger man more was the grave, un-English courtesy with which Luen-chi listened to his replies.

Richard was greatly interested in the old Chinese, and whenever the two men met they talked together. It was some months before Luen-chi invited the Englishman to his house; it was a great compliment —Darnell was the first member of the white colony to receive so definite a mark of Luen-chi's favour.

He lived about two miles out of Hanchow, and in spite of his modern ideas his house and garden were the most consummately Chinese things Richard had seen. Apparently there were unlimited servants, and Darnell was welcomed with a splendour which would have made Northboro' gasp. His host received him in a room filled with red and black lacquer, and china altogether more beautiful than anything which he had seen or imagined.

In the manner of his race, Luen-chi bade his honourable guest welcome to his miserable abode, and after the ceremonious greeting conducted him to the garden, a dream of crystal pools and fountains and colour.

Here tea was served, and when the meal was ready Luen-chi's daughter came out to them. This, as Darnell knew, was not in accordance with Chinese

etiquette, and he attributed it to the modern influences which had decided Luen-chi to allow his daughter to be educated at the big college in Hong-Kong.

Darnell was gravely presented to her.

Her name was Sansi, and she was pretty even in Richard's English conception. She was dark, with wonderful dark brown eyes, and a piquant, intelligent little face.

'How do you do, Mr Darnell?' she said, with a little bow. The English salutation on her lips was inexpressibly charming.

Richard, not certain whether to shake hands with her or not, bowed a little stiffly.

Whilst they drank tea—by this time Richard had acquired the taste for Chinese tea—they talked of Sansi's college and of England. She spoke both English and French, with delightful accents. She read English books which Luen-chi caused to be sent out specially for her. Her father was obviously proud of her, although few Chinese are proud of girl children.

'I will show you our garden, Mr Darnell,' she said when the meal was over. 'It is an old-fashioned garden. It is my respected father's one weakness. Otherwise he is, oh! so modern!'

With a little laugh she turned and led the way; Luen-chi, blandly happy, and Richard followed side by side.

It was the first of many visits, and Darnell often wondered why he alone of the English Colony was so honoured. Once Luen-chi was persuaded to bring Sansi to a garden party at the Cox's bungalow, where he loomed in the background, a figure of impenetrable reserve. Sansi was delighted with the party and her little face was delicately flushed with excitement when Richard bade her farewell.

Months went by, and the inevitable happened.

Perhaps Luen-chi had foreseen it; but it was not easy for any one to read his thoughts, certainly not Richard, for he was in love, which condition is, perhaps fortunately, not conducive to thought-reading.

He approached Luen-chi on the matter.

'You have told Sansi?' the old Chinese asked.

'No!' Darnell said, with only literal truth.

'It is good!' . . . and that was all that Darnell could get out of him.

Now that it had come to the point of decision Luen-chi's modernity was severely tested, but in the end he yielded to the joint entreaties of Richard and Sansi. Even if his modernity were not sufficiently profound to allow him to contemplate such a marriage without grave anxiety, his love for Sansi was strong enough to overcome his doubts.

The news flew round the colony. Darnell was to marry Luen-chi's daughter, Sansi.

She was very charming, Mrs Cox admitted, but . . .

A week after the marriage Darnell wrote to his father, but in the letter he made no mention of Sansi's wealth since it had played no part whatever in his choice. But it would have been balm to the Darnells . . . and they had need of balm.

Twelve months later Luen-chi was a grandfather, which, in China, is a condition of honour.

They called the boy Oliver Luen-chi Darnell. Oliver was chosen because, as far as Richard knew, no Darnell had borne the name previously.

Sansi called him neither Oliver nor Luen-chi, but many other names which are not to be found in English or French or Chinese.

It was most fortunate—the phrase is Mrs Cox's—

that Oliver was so obviously like his father. The colony was agreed on the point. He had Sansi's wonderful brown eyes, it is true, but otherwise he might have been an ordinary English baby. Luen-chi, the first time he saw him, looked down gravely at his grandson through eyes which were nearly closed. Sansi watched his face anxiously, but she was unable to divine the thoughts which were passing in her respected father's mind. Perhaps Oliver was a little too severe a test for his grandfather's modernity.

The babe followed the normal course of its kind, and on more than one occasion Richard had ample opportunity of making what became a favourite joke of his, '*Son* worship, my dear Sansi!' he would say, 'is not one of the recognised religions of China.'

'But it is a universal religion!' Sansi would laughingly reply, and proceed with the strange rites which are part of a mother's instinctive knowledge, whether the pigment of her skin be cream, or yellow, or black.

Soon after Oliver's birth Richard and Sansi moved into a big Chinese house near the European quarter. Luen-chi had prepared it for them, and the life they led there was a queer compound of Chinese luxury and the simple tastes which Darnell had brought with him from Northboro'. They possessed a garden which, although neither so ancient nor so exquisite as that of Luen-chi's, was yet the wonder of the English colony.

Richard named the house 'Lotus-land,' and Sansi was delighted with it when she knew the meaning.

She had brought all her books with her, and they called one of the softly lit rooms the library. It was in this room that the major part of Oliver's waking hours during the first few years of his life were spent. Two or three servants would be in attendance on the young despot, and Sansi would sit with a book on her knee, gravely watching the little group.

The Northboro' letters disapproved violently, and Richard smiled grimly before he tossed them aside. He wrote occasionally to his mother, and on ceremonial occasions sometimes sent her parcels of gorgeous silk. Beyond that, Northboro' had ceased to exist as far as Darnell was concerned. Here was his life, in his garden, with Sansi whom he loved and with Oliver, whom he loved too—as he came to discover—in a refreshingly different way.

And, as a background to their life, was the strange, unemotional, benevolent face of old Luen-chi.

CHAPTER II

THE MIND TRAINER

OLIVER was ten years of age before his parents commenced to think about, still less discuss, his education. Even then it was mainly his father who did so, for Sansi was much too happy with Oliver to worry about the future at all.

Luen-chi had always been very interested in the development of the young mind, and had taken care to impart to it certain maxims and precepts which he considered essential to the wisdom of youth. Not the least important section of this training had reference to the obligation Oliver was under, and the debt he owed, to his ancestors. These ladies and gentlemen were always exceedingly vague in Oliver's mind, and very easily they became personified in Luen-chi himself. The grandfather, with the unwavering eye, was the one person in the world, in those days, who filled Oliver with awe.

'Lil Ol-liv-er' discovered at a very early age that he could do almost what he wished with Sansi, and that his father was nearly as manageable, but Mr Luen (as Luen-chi was known to the Europeans) was quite another matter. The old Chinese had dark-brown penetrating eyes and an immobile countenance which was truly terrifying if one's mind was tinged with the slightest consciousness of wrong-doing. Once in Mr Luen's garden—a delightfully adventurous place to Oliver where were the most fascinating fishes in clear marble pools—the child and his grandfather were alone together. The servants had brought out tea in

the tiny, handleless cups which are so ridiculously easily upset, no matter how careful a small boy is; Luen-chi had been silent for some little time, and his eyes were on his grandson. Oliver made several efforts to make his respected grandfather talk. He admired the fishes, admired the flowers, talked of Sansi (whom he had never known to fail as a topic of conversation before) but all without avail; in the end he acquiesced in Luen-chi's mood and relapsed into a slightly frightened silence. For unending minutes the old man and the child sat gravely contemplating each other.

On a sudden the old Chinese made a choking noise in his throat, and, to Oliver's amazement, he saw that his grandfather—the most unemotional of mortals—was crying. Oliver, who knew nothing of the iron control which he had seen break down, sprang to his grandfather's side.

'Mr Luen, Mr Luen!' he said, 'don't cry!' In his excitement he had forgotten that he had been forbidden to address Luen-chi as Mr Luen.

And then Oliver, too, commenced to cry.

Presently the grandfather recovered himself, and holding Oliver at arm's length, he resumed his grave contemplation. The little chap's frightened eyes, with traces of tears still in them, were on the old man's face.

Luen-chi said something in Chinese, which the boy did not catch; he sighed deeply and suddenly left Oliver alone in the garden.

Afterwards Oliver told his mother of the strange occurrence. Sansi became heavy-eyed and thoughtful.

'But what is it, Sansi?' Oliver asked in bewilderment. 'What have I done?' It was so strange for laughing Sansi to be serious.

'You have done nothing, lil Ol-liv-er,' she said in her pretty, drawling English. 'My respected father does

not see himself in you. You are not of his people, that is all. It doesn't matter, lil Ol-liv-er.'

'I'm English,' said Oliver. 'Like father and you!'

'But I'm Chinese, like Mr Luen,' said Sansi miserably. 'But I love you, Ol-liv-er! I love you! . . .' She held him passionately to her, and for the second time that day he saw a grown-up's tears.

After the scene in Luen-chi's garden, Oliver for some time saw a great deal less of his grandfather, but his education, as far as Luen-chi was responsible for it, had been thorough. He had listened to the old man for long dreamy afternoons during the time when his mind was in its most plastic and receptive condition; and many of the ideas which had been implanted were germinating.

The first of the professional mind-trainers to whom Oliver was subjected was Miss Winterburn. At the first, Luen-chi had opposed her introduction, but Richard Darnell had insisted that his son's education should be, at least in part, Occidental. It was old Mrs Darnell in England—a widow now, for several years—who chose the governess. Her son had named a salary and terms which practically gave his mother the choice of the whole private teaching profession. In Darnell's letter he outlined his requirements. They were simple: English, French, and German, 'and of course she must be what is generally known as a lady.' He made no reference whatever to her religion, for the simple reason that in the mixture of peoples among which he moved, religious opinions were so varied and divergent that it had long been accepted as an axiom of polite behaviour never to refer to them. Mrs Darnell noticed the omission with a puckering of the brows, but in spite of her son's characteristic negligence religion played a large part in her choice.

Miss Winterburn was the daughter of a clergyman

of the Anglican Church, and favoured the same section of that church as Mrs Darnell. She was a 'lady' in Mrs Darnell's sense of that terrible word. Her scanty and tightly-done hair was very black; black also was the colour of the clothes she usually affected. She was hard. Her mouth was perhaps the hardest thing about her; she was, as the witty Frenchman said of a woman of a wholly different type, as thin as *two* Englishwomen. Her elbows and nose were pointed, which Oliver soon discovered was also true of many of her remarks. Her references were excellent; she had had long experience in pressing children's minds into moulds of the approved shapes, and her previous employers appeared to be grateful for it.

She arrived one morning in Hanchow, and from the little veranda Sansi and Oliver watched Darnell and the new governess drive up.

'Sansi, dear, this is Miss Winterburn,' Darnell said.

Miss Winterburn looked Sansi up and down critically . . . she had heard a great deal about her from the elder Mrs Darnell, who was of opinion that the marriage between her son and Sansi was not only unnatural but, in a sense, blasphemous.

'How do you do, Mrs . . . er . . . Darnell?' the governess said with a flat geniality.

'Have you had a pleasant journey?' Sansi asked helplessly, for this was a type of white woman she had not previously met.

'Quite, thank you. I have never left England before.' The latter remark conveyed the idea that Miss Winterburn heartily wished that she had continued such an excellent practice.

'I'm sure you would like to go to your room, Mees Winterburn,' Sansi said. 'You must be tired. We will have tea here when you are ready.'

'Tea?' Miss Winterburn queried with the maddeningly

polite intonation of governesses. ‘Oh, I forgot !’ she continued. ‘Of course, this is China !’ Her face slightly softened; it was her way of smiling. ‘Ah, this is little Oliver, I see,’ she went on as she noticed him for the first time.

Sansi had temporarily forgotten Oliver in her nervousness.

‘Oh, yes !’ she said, ‘My lil Ol-liv-er.’

‘How do you do, Oliver?’ asked Miss Winterburn pleasantly, bending perhaps six inches down towards him and regarding him as if he were a strange insect.

Oliver grinned awkwardly. He was thinking what a funny-looking lady his father had brought.

‘Say “Quite well, thank you, Miss Winterburn !”’ said Sansi.

Oliver did so . . . doubtfully.

Sansi clapped her hands and Li, the major-domo of the establishment, appeared.

‘Show Mees Winterburn to her room,’ Sansi ordered.

Li bowed low to the new-comer, who glared at him in amazement. No man—and she supposed that the heathens *were* men—had ever been ordered to show her to her room before. But, no doubt, it was China. Again the softening which was almost a smile.

She followed Li, who opened the door and stood aside, bowing even lower than before, for her to enter.

‘Lil ot wotter?’ he asked between bows. ‘Wantee
lil ot wotter?’

‘No !’ she said sharply. ‘Go away !’

She closed the door, and a puzzled and very hurt Li went away muttering certain things in his native tongue which would have made Miss Winterburn blush very vividly indeed had she heard and understood them. They reflected picturesquely on her ancestors

and condition, and included certain drastic remedies which Li apparently thought would have a beneficial effect on her. She joined the Darnells at tea and was visibly perturbed by the tiny little basins which were used as cups. She asked for milk and sugar with her tea, which quite destroyed its flavour; but in some mysterious way these conventional additions lent, in Miss Winterburn's mind, a moral, Christian air to the whole proceeding.

During the drinking Master Oliver's education was discussed.

The governess said very little as she had already received advice from Darnell's mother on the matter; the two ladies had understood each other thoroughly. Sansi was not at her ease with this strange woman who, as the minutes passed, seemed to become more and more unlike the other white women she had met. The father wanted Oliver to 'get a grip' of the three modern languages, and also to know something of English history.

Miss Winterburn 'quite understood,' and when the tea came to an end, suggested that Oliver should show her the garden. 'We must get to know each other,' she said ominously.

She took his hand as they walked away, but he managed to free it very soon on some pretext or other, as he disliked people who held his hand.

'And what is your name, Oliver?' Miss Winterburn asked him as soon as they were out of earshot of the veranda.

'Oliver Luen-chi Darnell,' he replied.

'And who gave you that name?' she pursued implacably.

'Father,' he said, 'and Mr Luen.'

'That was hardly what I meant, Oliver. Don't you know your catechism?'

'Catechism?' Oliver replied in a tone which showed that he did not.

'Yes,' Miss Winterburn went on. 'Your catechism and your prayers and so on.'

'I know *some* prayers,' Oliver admitted. 'Father taught me some and Mr Luen. Sansi knows some, too. . . . I like Sansi's best.'

'Mr Luen taught you some? Who is Mr Luen?'

'My respected grandfather,' Oliver said in the grave way Sansi had taught him.

'What prayers?' Miss Winterburn pursued. 'I mean what prayers did your grandfather teach you?'

Oliver rattled off one in Chinese.

It sounded, to Miss Winterburn's ears, deeply shocking.

'I don't understand Chinese,' she said sharply. 'Do you know the Lord's Prayer?'

'How does it start?' asked Oliver, who was not accustomed to talking about prayers in the morning. He was very patient because Sansi had said that he had to be very, very polite to Miss Winterburn, and had warned him that she would probably ask him questions. Sansi, deep down in her, was very suspicious of white women.

'Our Father, which art in heaven,' Miss Winterburn quoted.

'Oh, yes, I know that one!' said Oliver.

'Do you say it every night?' she asked.

'Not every night. I used to when I was little. I used to be frightened in the dark. Silly, wasn't it? I used to say this one, too.' He commenced another in Chinese, but she interrupted him.

'I don't want you to talk in Chinese, Oliver,' she said. 'I'm going to teach you some beautiful languages. I think you should always pray in English. It is better, very much better.'

'Doesn't God speak Chinese?' he asked. The governess glanced sharply at him but his little upturned face showed the innocence of the question.

'Eh . . . I don't know. Of course He does, but all the same, little boys should pray in English if they know it. I think God would prefer it.' This was true, Miss Winterburn actually *did* think so.

'Mr Luen told me to do it in Chinese,' Oliver said doubtfully.

'Mr Luen is not your governess,' she pointed out. 'You must be an obedient boy, Oliver, and we shall be great *friends*. There is a lady in England—your father's mother—who is just as near to you as Mr Luen, and you have never seen her.'

'My respected grandfather . . .' Oliver commenced.

'Don't argue, Oliver, *please*,' said Miss Winterburn, and that last word was almost the first one in anger ever addressed to Oliver.

One of the rooms leading from the veranda had been turned into a school-room, and there Oliver's education began the following morning. Usually he had spent the morning with Sansi, and he by no means welcomed the change.

The first lesson was devoted to a chat on English history. Miss Winterburn passed rapidly and tactfully over the early centuries, and came to the Reformation in the course of perhaps ten minutes. Arrived there she came to anchor, and commenced to give Oliver a highly-coloured version of the foundation of her national church which, she told him, was the most important happening in English history.

Oliver was deeply impressed with the vague, highly-coloured badness of the Pope of those days, and after giving the matter careful thought expressed the opinion that he was a devil.

'A what?' asked an enormously shocked and outraged Miss Winterburn.

Oliver repeated the word in Chinese and the governess imagined that the—to her ears—uncouth sound had a still more sinister meaning.

'Certainly *not!*' she snapped. 'You will understand, Oliver, that I do not allow *language* to be used. Wherever did you hear such terrible words?'

'From Sansi . . . she told me all about devils. They eat you.'

'Oh, I see!' she said, a little mollified. 'I thought you swore.'

'Swore?' he repeated.

'Yes. Used a bad word, a wicked word, a word no good little boy ever uses!'

Oliver maintained a mystified silence during the rest of Miss Winterburn's lesson, and she formed the private opinion that the boy was not *very* intelligent. After all, what was one to expect?

The governess distrusted the native servants with an infinite distrust, and as far as was humanly possible made herself independent of them. As the weeks went by Sansi discovered that she had no right in the nursery between ten and twelve. Whenever she entered—and at the commencement of the new *régime* she did so frequently, for she was very lonely in the mornings without Oliver—Miss Winterburn ceased whatever she was doing and stood in silence, with angular arms folded across her chest. After a few nervous remarks to Oliver, Sansi would withdraw and wander aimlessly about the garden until midday gave him back to her.

The one person who could ignore Miss Winterburn with success was Mr Luen, and even his success was temporary. The first time they met was one afternoon at tea in the veranda, and Mr Luen looked at

her through unsettling, half-closed eyes. Sansi, in honour of her father's visit was in a Chinese dress of a wonderful blue silk which contrasted strangely with Miss Winterburn's decorous alpaca.

'Greeting !' Mr Luen replied briefly to the introduction.

Oliver sat at his grandfather's feet during the meal and the conversation centred in him.

'Lil Ol-liv-er work?' Mr Luen asked in his quaint, stilted English.

'As well as we can expect, I think,' Miss Winterburn said, only partly gathering the meaning of the old Chinese.

'So?' Luen-chi replied. The vowel sound was long and the word might have meant anything. Certainly Miss Winterburn had no inkling of its significance.

Much of the talk was in Chinese, because when Mr Luen wished it, his knowledge of English became very small. He would ask for the meaning of phrases which he knew quite well, and when he was in such a mood both Sansi and Oliver knew that it was quicker, and that he wished them, to speak in his native tongue.

Always he talked to Oliver in Chinese.

He came one morning to the nursery in the middle of one of Miss Winterburn's talks on English history. She looked up to see the bowing Li usher him into the room. Sansi, as Miss Winterburn knew, was out.

The governess rose and stood with folded arms, awaiting his slow progress. Behind her uncompromising pince-nez her eyes were bright.

'Greeting !' Mr Luen said imperturbably.

'Good-morning, my respected grandfather,' Oliver said, to which salutation the old man replied in his native tongue.

Miss Winterburn inclined her head slightly to Mr Luen, but maintained her silence. For a moment

Luen-chi remained standing, his eyes on vacancy; then he sat down.

'No interrupt!' he said peacefully, but Miss Winterburn remained standing, her eyes just a little brighter. Oliver was looking from one to the other. Here were the two people with whom he was always on his very best behaviour.

'I'm sorry, Mr Luen, but you are interrupting my work!' The words broke a terrible silence of minutes.

'No interrupt!' Mr Luen said blandly. Miss Winterburn was conscious of an entirely unladylike, but very human desire to do physical hurt to the impassive face, to smash that which baffled her. But it was merely a desire and it found expression only in her sitting down very suddenly. For perhaps half a minute the silence reasserted itself. Mr Luen's eyes were now on the governess's face unwaveringly.

'No interrupt!' he said again, with heart-breaking composure.

'Ah! we'll go on with our French, I think,' said Miss Winterburn with an inspiration. 'Now, Oliver, open *Remi et ses Amis* at page sixteen. I want you to read it after me.'

For a while they continued, Miss Winterburn slightly intoning and Oliver getting as near to the pronunciation as he was able. Of French Mr Luen knew not a word, and he listened with eyes which were even more nearly closed than before.

Miss Winterburn was filled with a sense of elation. A touch of colour had come to her cheeks.

All this the old Chinese appreciated.

The spinster's inspired idea rendered the visits of Luen-chi during Oliver's working hours abortive. She was prepared, if necessary, to go on with *Remi et ses Amis* until midday, and made up her mind to obtain an equally simple German book with which

she would vary the proceedings the next time the respected grandfather came.

At last Luen-chi rose to depart, and for defiant seconds the eyes of the governess met his. When once he had gone Miss Winterburn took up the history lesson at the point he had interrupted. He had looked at her through immobile eyelids when he left; there might have been the merest suspicion of a smile around his lips. Miss Winterburn was not certain.

Luen-chi had learnt a good deal from the encounter in the nursery, and made it his business to become a still more important factor in Oliver's education than he had been before. As the grandson's mind developed so his long talks with Luen-chi became more suggestive, more fruitful. Miss Winterburn was quite aware of this influence in Oliver's life, and as the months went by she endeavoured, by every means in her power, to implant the narrow tenets of her creed in the boy's mind. She would probably have been successful, if it had not been for Oliver's grandfather, for both Darnell and Sansi were entirely apathetic on the question. Luen-chi's religion, or rather his outlook on life, was a mixture of Confucian morals, Buddhist tenderness, and that cynicism which masquerades as fatalism. Like most of his countrymen Luen-chi used proverbial phrases to clarify his meaning, and to the mind of the child proverbs were more clear, more illuminating, and more easily grasped, than all Miss Winterburn's reiterated belief.

Once Oliver quoted his governess on a matter at which he was at variance with Luen-chi. The old Chinese frowned.

'A hen does not herald the dawn!' he said sharply.

Oliver did not quite gather the meaning of his respected grandfather's phrase, but afterwards he discussed the matter with the governess.

'What did my respected grandfather mean?' he asked, after he had quoted the proverb to her.

'I think Mr Luen meant that I am not as clever as he is,' Miss Winterburn said. 'It is a matter of opinion,' she went on. 'In any case, the crowing in the early morning is quite useless, Oliver, and disturbs people's rest. Hens *lay eggs* even if they do not crow, or, as Mr Luen said, "herald the dawn"!'

But Miss Winterburn did not pursue the literal application of Luen-chi's proverb further. It was not altogether appropriate, not 'nice,' as she would have said.

'Unpleasant old man,' was her private comment on the respected grandfather, which was very strong language in such a lady as Miss Winterburn.

CHAPTER III

TOYAMA

MISS WINTERBURN'S reign lasted for six years, and during the whole of that time her energies were centred in making Oliver, as she would have said, 'a little Christian.' The indifference of his father on this subject filled her with amazement, because in spite of his long residence abroad she argued that he was still English, and still subject to the claims of his national church.

It was this intense conviction—and like most elderly spinsters, all Miss Winterburn's convictions were intense—which caused her to bring the Rev. William Strongitham to Lotus Land. The Rev. William was a missionary at whose church Miss Winterburn regularly attended service, and to which on occasions she had taken Oliver. He was a Yorkshireman, long and lean and enthusiastic. He had a very red nose, which actually *was* caused by indigestion, and which increased the effect of hunger his appearance conveyed. He was quite sincere in his work, and he was very much distressed when Miss Winterburn told him about Oliver and the 'godless' home in which he was being brought up. Mr Strongitham blinked a great deal whenever he was listening to any one, and this was a little disconcerting to the governess as she told him the story.

When she asked if she might bring the Rev. William to Lotus Land, Sansi was delighted, and a particularly nice meal awaited the reverend gentleman. Sansi was charming, and chattered ceaselessly, so much so indeed that Mr Strongitham found it almost impossible to do any talking at all. And then—whether or not it was a little joke on Sansi's part Miss Winterburn

never knew—it became unmistakably clear that the hostess regarded the visit as one auguring, if not a betrothal, at least something in the nature of an understanding between Miss Winterburn and the Rev. Mr Strongitham. It was an embarrassing situation, and the missionary's nose became redder than his indigestion usually made it. The governess bit her lower lip; never had she so wanted to slap Sansi, although the latter played her little joke with disarming innocence.

'Er . . .' the reverend gentleman commenced gently, with his finger tips pressed tightly together. 'I had hoped to see Mr Darnell. I am sorry he is not here.'

At that moment Luen-chi was announced and shortly after—at the earliest possible moment—the missionary withdrew.

He achieved the interview he desired with Mr Darnell, though, by calling at his office the next morning.

'I have called to see you about your child, Mr Darnell,' the missionary commenced.

'That so? Have a whisky and soda?'

'No. No, thanks.'

'No . . . I suppose not,' commented Darnell.

'It was your governess, Miss Winterburn, who suggested that I should see you. She is a member of my church. I was at your house yesterday.' The reverend gentleman was a little nervous.

'So I understand, Mr Strongitham. I was sorry I was not there, but what can I do for you?'

'Briefly, Mr Darnell, Oliver, whom I have met on several occasions, has not been admitted to the Christian Church, has not been baptized.'

'That's so!' Darnell answered as imperturbably as Luen-chi might have done.

'Well, it is rather a bad example, I think; it negatives much of my work in converting the natives to the true faith.'

'Surely not ! They don't bother about my little chap.'

'But it is a matter of principle, Mr Darnell ; I understand that your family is an Anglican one ?'

'Oh, yes, we've always been Church of England, you know.'

'Then *surely* you would like your son to be of the same church ?'

'As far as my personal wishes go, yes, although I've no definite cut-and-dried view myself, but you see, in my marriage there are complications . . . '

The clergyman was silent.

'You see, my wife is not a member of your church,' Darnell went on.

'But if you expressed a definite wish . . .' the clergyman suggested.

'That's just it, I don't; I've no feeling in the matter at all, certainly not enough to persuade my wife to do anything she doesn't want to. And that's all there is about it. I'm being quite frank with you, Mr Strongitham.'

'Ah, well,' said the reverend gentleman feebly, 'I considered it my duty, you know.'

'Quite so, quite so . . .' agreed Darnell. 'I'm sure you see my position is peculiar.'

They shook hands and the reverend gentleman went his way.

Miss Winterburn learned the result of the interview with a compressing of the lips.

'It's outrageous !' she said.

'But there is nothing we can do, my dear Miss Winterburn !'

'Alas, no !' she agreed. 'Every day I can see that heathen Luen-chi's grip on the child growing. The boy has attempted to argue with me about the most *sacred* things. . . .'

'Ah, well, we must persevere, and one day, even yet,

we may pluck the brand from the burning. I do see, of course, that Mr Darnell is in a most difficult situation.'

The reverend gentleman sighed as he finished and blinked hopefully, but that evening Miss Winterburn wrote to the elder Mrs Darnell that she would still do her best although she was very saddened and depressed.

Under normal conditions the governess would have remained with the Darnells until Oliver went to the college in Hong-Kong, but fate intervened, and to Sānsi's delight a marriage *was* arranged between the missionary and Miss Winterburn. As a result, Oliver went to Hong-Kong some months earlier than his father had intended. He continued the modern languages in which Miss Winterburn, with all her faults, had given him an excellent groundwork. During the first vacation he informed his parents that he had discovered that Art was the one thing in life which had any attraction for him. His father smiled blandly, remembering the time long past when he himself had meant to be an engine-driver.

The cause of Oliver's discovery that Art alone held happiness for him was primarily John Airlee, the art master at his new school. Airlee belonged to that great body of disappointed men who have failed in one or other of the Arts, and achieve precarious livelihood by teaching what they failed to practice successfully. The bitterness of failure, of conscious failure, was Airlee's; that he was being drawn through life clinging to the hem of Art's garment did not lessen the bitterness.

As far as it was in his power to become an artist, Airlee had done so; long years of hope had passed before he had learnt that his ability lacked the keen edge which means success. Like most people in whose lives the central fact is a disappointment, Airlee was exceedingly lovable; his boys, most of whom were European, were devoted to him.

It was whispered in the school that he drank heavily, and although there were many who indignantly denied it, Airlee was not one of them. There were times when his talk certainly had a fluency about it which argued inspiration of some kind.

Occasionally in the middle of a lesson, something or other would remind him of his student days in Chelsea or Paris, and he would spin yarn after yarn to the listening boys. He was an excellent talker, but many of his reminiscences were entirely unsuited to his audience.

The art master regarded Oliver as an English boy for some time after he came to the school. Among his fellow-students the same belief prevailed, for by the time Oliver was sixteen the Chinese blood in him was even less obvious than when Luen-chi, in his fairy garden, had wept because of his English grandson.

A strange friendship sprang up between Mr Airlee and Oliver. Alone among the masters he lived away from the college, and Oliver visited his bungalow. Here, for the first time, the boy was brought into contact with art, as the master understood it. Airlee pointed out the beauty of certain Whistler etchings, the wonderful line in an Aubrey Beardsley drawing; he showed Oliver work of some of the very modern men, Post Impressionists and the like. He had a wealth of anecdote about the men of whose pictures he was talking, and wrapped them in a rosy glow of hero-worship. Airlee had met Whistler several times, and like most people, had several delightful stories about him:

'Yes . . . and Jimmy became . . . Whistler . . . and I'm slaving away in this hole. . . .'

'Every one can't get to the top,' said Oliver awkwardly, distressed by the master's sudden emotion. 'After all, you did *know* these people. You were one of them,' he went on.

'You don't understand,' Airlee said. 'You've never

watched a man go steadily up, up, up, whilst you worked and worked . . . and stuck. Ah, me! It's no use making myself miserable. But let me be a lesson to you. Shun . . . art . . . and whisky. Don't think that whisky was the cause of my failure . . . it came after. But what am I thinking about, speaking to a boy like this! You're a rum 'un, Darnell,' he went on, after a pause. 'I don't suppose there's another boy to whom I would have talked . . . why, you're . . .' Airlee's words suddenly died away.

'Yes, I'm half Chinese.' Oliver had understood the thought which had flashed into Airlee's brain.

'Now, I never noticed it before,' Airlee said. 'Though I see it now, clearly, now that I know. . . .'

'My mother is Chinese,' Oliver went on.

'And your father?'

'English. My mother is Luen-chi's daughter.'

'My word!' Airlee commented. Luen-chi's name was almost proverbial, even in Hong-Kong. 'It is a pity your father is English, though,' Airlee continued.

'Why, sir?' Oliver asked in surprise.

'It would have been better had he been a Celt, I think, more interesting. You speak Chinese?'

'Oh, yes! By the way, you asked me just now to shun art. You've made me very interested, though.'

And none of them, Airlee, or Oliver, or Sansi, or Luen-chi, dreamed that this friendship with Airlee would alter the main current of Oliver's life. As for his father, he still remembered the time when he had meant to be an engine-driver, and was very amused indeed when Oliver talked of Art.

Oliver's last afternoon in Hong-Kong was spent in Airlee's bungalow. The art master was looking at a sketch the boy had made of some old Chinese shipping in the harbour.

'It is time for you to go, I can teach you nothing more, Oliver,' he said, with almost exultant sadness. 'You have, my young friend, that for which I have worked in vain.'

Oliver remained silent.

'This,' the art master went on, tapping the sketch in his hand, 'this is genius. In ten, nay in five years, Europe will be talking. . . . And nearly everything you know up to now, I have taught you!'

'It's most awfully nice of you, Mr Airlee, but for the life of me I can't see anything very wonderful in my little sketch; certainly all that is good in it I have learnt from you.'

'That's the queerest part of it; you don't seem to know your own powers. If I didn't know you, I should suspect you of false modesty. Shun false modesty as you would the devil! It is the most irritating of the many vices of the English.'

'And you really would advise me to go on with it?' Oliver asked. 'There was a time when you begged me to shun it . . . like false modesty,' he added with a smile.

'That was before I recognised in you . . . this kind of thing,' he tapped the sketch again. 'Go to the school I told you of in Toyama. Learn all you can learn there, and then, armed with your knowledge, you shall burst on London . . . Paris . . . the world. And from afar, I, your old master, will watch you, the one thing he has made of which he is proud. I may not be an artist, but I *am* a teacher. But we shall be getting proud. Shun pride, Oliver, as you would the devil . . .'

It was a long time before Richard Darnell awoke to the fact that Oliver's desire to be an artist was something essentially different from his own boyish desire to drive a train, and after a great many people

had told him that his son was a genius he began to see that there *was* something after all in the boy's work. It was not what Mr Darnell had always understood by art (his standards did not greatly vary from those of Northboro' even after more than twenty years' absence) but the enthusiastic reports he had received from the college, and an interview he had with Mr Airlee who once called on him at his hotel in Hong-Kong, convinced him in the end that Oliver's career would follow neither the pattern he had set, nor the more sedate one of Luen-chi.

Sansi loved Oliver's pictures; bubbled about them; kissed them when he brought them to her and foretold wild successes for her boy. If he wanted to be an artist he should be an artist.

Luen-chi did not commit himself; he would hold a picture at arm's length and gaze at it through eyes which were nearly closed before he looked up from it to his waiting grandson. 'Pretty,' he would say, and hand the sketch back to Oliver.

After he had left the college in Hong-Kong Oliver remained at Hanchow awhile, uncertain what he would do during the ensuing vacation. Mr Airlee visited 'Lotus-land,' although he had refused previous invitations.

Sansi did not appreciate the Scotsman, but to Oliver's surprise Luen-chi and the art master appeared to understand and like each other. Possibly it was the subtle approximation of the philosophies of their lives, but, whatever the attraction between them, Airlee spent most of his days in Luen-chi's garden, where he made many laborious sketches. The art master would sometimes sit with a sketch of his old pupil in one hand, and one of his own in the other. As likely as not both sketches were of the same tiny bit of the garden, and Airlee would look at the

two for some time in silence, and then, with a sigh, he would hurl his own away, only to find it rescued a little later by Luen-chi's too admirable servants.

One evening Luen-chi and Airlee were alone in the lamp-lit garden. Airlee was smoking an old black briar, and Luen-chi lay back in a low cane chair watching him.

'And you would that Oliver were a painter?' the Chinese asked suddenly.

'He is an *artist* already,' said Airlee. 'I am a painter,' and the distinction was not lost on the old Chinese.

'But in London, in Paris, in the European cities, how would they receive a painter who was half . . . yellow?' Luen-chi went on without a trace of bitterness in his voice.

'Art alone is international,' said Airlee. 'Alone it transcends race. An artist may be black, white, or yellow; what matters it?'

'Would he not be happier here in Hanchow?'

'He belongs to the world,' Airlee said. 'You have no right to coop him up in one town.'

'But he can paint here, surely?'

'No! He must see cities and men. . . .'

Luen-chi sighed, and the two men relapsed into a silence which was only broken by the soothing sounds which came from Airlee's pipe.

The following spring Oliver went to the school at Toyama whence (as Airlee had told him) had come many of the classic painters of Japan. Sansi wept when he went; Japan seemed so much farther away than Hong-Kong. It is a little town on a bay of incredible beauty, a little town which stands apart from the modern Japan, from that wild stream of commercialism which is sweeping from one end of the unhappy country to the other. One never sees bowler hats in Toyama, and the bowler hat is typical of modern Japan, a

bowler hat which is ill-fitting and which is even more absurd on a Japanese head than it is on that of an Englishman.

The fragile houses—a multiplicity of blending colours—cluster round the bay in which steamships are rarely seen, but which is often crowded with the reddish-brown or yellow sails of native craft. Everywhere are gardens, gardens in which it is impossible to hurry over anything, gardens which induce quiet thought as the poppy induces sleep. Above the town the hills rise gently, clothed with trees which are a blaze of colour in their appointed seasons, seas of white and pink, mauve and crimson. Here are temples cunningly interspersed, jewels in the rays of the setting sun, wherein the white-clad priests minister to their gods. If those same gods look down on Toyama at all, they must envy the mortals whose abiding place it is.

There are many schools in Toyama, for most of the artists have a few pupils. Notchi was the man to whom Oliver came on a morning when the blossoms on the hill-sides were a wild wonder. Notchi belonged to the older school of Japanese painting . . . the impressionist one, but he kept severely apart from the controversies which were raging at the time between those who loved beauty as their fathers had done, and the men whose vision was tinctured with western ideas.

Notchi screwed his ugly, humorous face into a grimace as he was looking at Oliver's work.

'You will be a painter, yes, one day!' he said. 'Mistaire Air-lee he say to me! He talk much . . . Mistaire Airlee.' Afterwards Oliver discovered that the quaint little Japanese spoke several languages.

There was much to unlearn . . . much to learn, and in the quiet beauty of Toyama the uneventful months went by quickly as if the gods in the temples on the hill-sides really did envy the mortals their

temporary home, and were determined to make it as temporary as possible.

And with the months went Notchi's faint praise.
He *praised* Oliver.

'But you should stay here in Toyama always,' he added. 'Here an artist may live the life he must live if he is to produce his best; here are no distractions . . . quiet, and apple-blossom, which is very beautiful . . . as beautiful as the snow on the mountians.'

And for a long time Oliver *did* stay at Toyama, the most seductive, alluring place in all the world. Notchi's ugly face beamed approval.

But outside Toyama were other forces which called to Oliver. Sansi was one of them . . . her need of him, of 'lil Ol-liv-er.'

And in the end he went.

But there were much more complicated calls to him than Sansi's. That in his father's blood which had bade him leave Northboro' all those years ago, and seek out the ends of the earth, was in his also. Oliver told himself that it was for Sansi's sake he left Toyama behind him, Sansi, and his father and old Luen-chi. But in his heart he knew that his motives were complex.

Once only Oliver saw Mr Airlee after he left Toyama. He had with him a bundle of sketches he had made, and Airlee looked through them gravely before he handed them back to his one-time pupil.

'I was right,' he said briefly. 'You must go to London. I will give you letters which you can use whenever you go. It may be a wrench to leave your life here behind, but go you must. To London and then to Paris.'

He sat at his broken-down desk and wrote two letters which he gave to Oliver. One was addressed to Anthony Muirhead, Linnell Studios, Chelsea; the other to David Trollope, the Palette Club, Regent Street, London.

'These men are artists,' he said simply. 'They will be glad to meet you, and to help you for your own sake when they know you; they will come to know you for mine.'

'Thank you very much,' said Oliver. 'It's going to be a bit of a tussle to get away, and in a sense I don't want to. But I feel I must go . . . something urges me. I felt it even in Toyama.'

'Something is urging you. You must be careful in London, Oliver. Your art, always, is the first thing in your life.'

'Careful?'

'Yes . . . of men and women. Particularly of women. They will lionise you, make much of you, flatter you, turn your head if you are not careful. Luen-chi wondered if your mixed blood would prove hurtful to you in London. It is not so. It will add interest to you . . . particularly in the women's eyes. Always remember that where women come in, art goes. Art is exclusive. She demands the whole of a man before she gives him her fullest gifts.'

'An exacting mistress!' said Oliver with a laugh.

'A mistress, and a wife and a mother,' Airlee replied. 'She alone is the complete woman.'

'It's quaint how your outlook on life is like Luen-chi's,' said Oliver, thoughtfully. 'He has the same contempt for women.'

'It is not contempt,' said Airlee. 'Fear is nearer the word, for like art a woman demands the whole of a man, or none. And when a woman—or art—spurns a man it is the devil, so it's the devil either way, Oliver. That Oriental contempt, which you share, is based on instinctive *fear* of women.'

'It's rather hopeless,' Oliver smiled.

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Immediately after his return from Hong-Kong Oliver broached the question of his visit to England. Sansi, who had always said that Oliver was to be an artist if he wished it, dissolved into tears when she appreciated the fact that it meant a separation of years, longer possibly than Toyama, and without the flying visits which had softened his absence there. Not a little to Oliver's surprise his father was quite willing that he should go, and suggested that in a little while he and Sansi should have a long holiday in England when they could be with Oliver. This calmed Sansi's tears for awhile. Luen-chi shrugged his shoulders and was inscrutable. It was well that Oliver should see his father's country . . . but one day he would come back to Hanchow. If the gods willed, he would still find Luen-chi in his garden. . . .

A short time before Oliver left Hanchow for Hong-Kong and Europe, he spent a few days with Luen-chi at his grandfather's special request. The garden was as Chinese as when Richard Darnell had first met Sansi in it. The servants moved as silently, and with the same mechanical efficiency.

Oliver spent most of the time painting, with Luen-chi sitting a few yards away from him, gravely watching. The respected grandfather was not perceptibly older than he was in Oliver's earliest memories, and he still maintained his almost impenetrable reserve.

The last night they were together the two men sat in a corner of the garden with the eternal tea on a little table between them. Behind Luen-chi was a mass of wisteria, more profuse, more gorgeous than wisteria in any western land.

'So you will go to London?' Luen-chi himself broke the silence. He spoke in his native tongue.

Oliver, who knew that his grandfather expected no reply, remained silent.

'You will go to see the family of your father. They will not be like Sansi . . . or like me. But always, Luen-chi, here is your home.' The respected grandfather had never addressed his grandson as Luen-chi before. Oliver had almost forgotten that it was his name, and was a little startled by the unaccustomed way his grandfather had addressed him.

'Always this is my home, my respected grandfather.'

'In those barbarous lands you will find that women, who were made to minister to men, to their lords, are exalted even beyond men. Homage is paid to them, and men pour out their wealth before them like water. Remember, always, my son, that women are as thorns in the flesh. They bring into the world a man's children. Beyond that they are naught. The women of the west are brazen and without modesty; they know not the wise books which control women's lives in this land; and even if they knew them they are so lost to womanly duty that they would not give heed to them. Shun the women of the west. They will suck a man dry and give him naught in return, for what has a woman to give? Nothing, save only children. And many of the women of the west—civilised women they call themselves—do not bear children to their lords. They are not even women, therefore less than nothing; but in them you will find the scent of the musk rose, the beauty of azaleas . . . and all the guile of the serpent. A woman, as such, is incapable of truth. Watch them . . . do not listen. But a brazen western women is able to lie with her eyes as well as her tongue; so beware.'

'When time shall come to its full, and you return to Hanchow, you shall take to yourself a wife of my people, a maiden who shall be dutiful and obedient and is not of the ways of western women. A maiden who shall bear thee children. . . . But of the western women,

the brazen ones, beware. Your grandfather of his wisdom has spoken.'

And having spoken, the old Chinese relapsed into his usual placid silence, leaving Oliver to ponder his words.

The next morning Oliver bade his respected grandfather farewell, and later in the day he shook hands with his father and kissed the weeping Sansi many times. She had forgotten that he was a man, forgotten everything excepting that he was leaving her. 'My lil Ol-liv-er,' she moaned. 'My lil Ol-liv-er !'

CHAPTER IV

MARGARET

WHEN Oliver alighted from the boat-train at Charing Cross he was conscious at once of the peculiar excitement which characterises an English crowd, an excitement which may be perfectly under control but which is none the less obvious to a sympathetic observer. But there is something in the crowd which a boat-train disgorges at Charing Cross which differentiates it from all other crowds; and Oliver was at least partially conscious of this as he gazed around him.

The noise and movement interested him greatly, and he watched the scene for some little time before he gathered his traps together. With the assistance of a depressed porter, who lacked both the servility and efficiency of the porters in his own land, Oliver achieved a cab. Almost at once he was looking curiously at the lions and the column in the Square, and was on his way to a comfortable little hotel in one of the turnings off Regent Street. It was the hotel his father had recommended, indeed the one in which the elder Darnell had stayed on his last night in London.

Oliver dined in the hotel, and after the meal he strolled out into the night. He was in a pleasant, complacent mood, and his first impression of London was one of warm jollity; the theatre crowd shows any city at its best. The sauntering people fascinated him. Bright eyes met his easily and naturally, with a freedom which was new to Oliver; men and women were laughing as they passed. Oliver imagined there was some universal joke which he was unable to see. The

shops were in many cases still brilliantly lit, and were intensely strange to him. Motor buses, juggernauts of light, bore down on him and passed harmlessly on; taxi-cabs and cars flashed by incessantly.

At this evening hour the cities of his own land would be putting on that air of calm (to a great extent deceptive) which comes to them with darkness. But London was a city of eternal movement, varied, kaleidoscopic. There was in the atmosphere—for long Oliver sought vainly for the word—a striving, a sense of effort. The men and women, whether they passed him sombrely or left ripples of laughter in their wake, were adventuring, seeking for something . . . they lacked the repose which Oliver was wont to associate with the evening hour. It puzzled him greatly, as he passed slowly along, that lack of satisfaction in the fleeting faces. . . .

He came suddenly into Piccadilly Circus and recognised it by the little god, Eros, perched in the centre, and silhouetted against the blue electric light which dimmed the sky. He remembered how mockingly Airlee had spoken of the little god who dominates that one spot in all London.

The corner of Shaftesbury Avenue was a blaze of light, and Oliver remained standing there awhile, watching the crowd which drifted by him. Inevitably the women who passed glanced at him; he was so utterly unlike the ordinary man who ‘hangs about’ that part of the town.

Several spoke to him, as they passed, in low tones of calculated and practised allurement.

In their last chat Airlee had told Oliver about London’s nightly parade, and he had sufficient knowledge of the ghastly business to save his feelings from shock. The ordinary Englishman is accustomed to the sight, and to the fact, but to the grandson of

Luen-chi it had not become normal, and the whole idea was indecent to an intolerable degree.

Deep down in his being Oliver believed that women, as such, should not obtrude, that they should form part of the calm background of life even as in Mohammedan countries, where women are veiled, and shut out of a man's life and work. But here in this wonderful London all was different ; it was a city of women. They were everywhere; their disturbing eyes were everywhere. From the coarsely soft voices of the painted ones he simply turned away, and there was that in his attitude which prevented even the most hardened of them from speaking a second time. One of them, quite a young girl, turned sharply as she became conscious of the disgust she had called up in him, and her dismayed eyes met Oliver's. She shivered, and passed on hurriedly.

But it was not only the poor derelicts who offended Oliver's Oriental fastidiousness. He was amazed at the general lack of reserve in, and about, women.

The Chinese ladies he had known in Hanchow and Hong-Kong had invariably possessed this reserve, but here in London women were positively challenging; the men seemed incidental, dancing attention on their ladies. He saw women in evening dress in passing cabs, some even walking along in the crowd; women with scantily-clad shoulders, women who were consciously, affirmatively *women*.

No one seemed to notice it; it was that which shocked him; it had become *normal*, and yet to Oliver it was indescribably wrong and unsettling. Airlee's words about women flashed into his brain, and in the light of the impression London had made on him they assumed a deeper, a more disturbing meaning.

A man, unsavoury and decrepit, murmured something in Oliver's ear. 'For the love of Gawd !' Oliver heard.

He gave the creature half a crown, and with muttered thanks the man slipped away into the night.

Oliver passed on thoughtfully into Leicester Square where he joined the stream of people who were passing into a brilliantly-lit theatre.

The theatre he knew in China had not changed in essentials for a thousand years, and to a modern educated Chinese was intolerably dull. Airlee, among the things he had promiscuously cursed, had included the English stage, so that Oliver was slightly prejudiced before he entered the great white and mauve theatre.

He glanced curiously at the audience before the curtain rose. Many of the people were in evening dress, and the astoundingly casual manner in which women exposed the upper parts of their bodies deepened the impression he had formed of the absence of reserve in English women. In his country a woman's body was never exposed in public. The thing was unthinkable, and, to Oliver, crude beyond expression. The men's faces seemed coarse to him; here and there was one bloated and bestial. In the main they were much older than the women with them. They laughed noisily, and without mirth. They looked at the women around them appraisingly, but without any fine perception.

Oliver could not imagine Luen-chi without exquisite perception . . . even of women; his respected grandfather's mind was too flexible, too subtle. As he looked around him in the theatre, for the first time he consciously regretted that in him was the blood of this white race. He could imagine little that was good coming from these people. But so much was the blood of the white race in him, that unless one had looked at him very carefully indeed that night, he would have passed unnoticed in the crowd of English pleasure seekers.

The first part of the programme consisted of the usual inane variety turns of the type which usually preceded the ballet. Most of the jokes Oliver missed owing to his lack of knowledge of current slang. He sat through them, however.

He had never seen a ballet before, and it seemed to him that the orgy of women which this new country permitted culminated in the scene on the stage. There was extremely good dancing, that struck him at once; but everywhere the idea of crude sex was emphasised, flung at him. The stage was filled with fairies—so the programme assured him. They simply were not fairies as far as Oliver was concerned. They were women, women in whom every sexual characteristic was heightened and distorted; and not all their art lessened the impression.

But at last a fairy did appear.

She was a world-famous dancer, and the woman was lost in her dancing. Here was no crudity, nothing but her beauty, and, like all beauty, it struck the responsive chord in Oliver at once. He was lost as he watched her pirouetting, as he watched her dainty feet kiss the stage. She softened the crudity of the whole theatre, of the audience, of coarse-faced men. . . .

During an interval Oliver walked round the famous lounge; here, even more naked and unashamed than outside in the streets, the painted women bargained and haggled. There were crowds of them. They touched one as they passed. Oliver could stand it no longer. He went out into the cool air of Leicester Square where the crowd was still circling like uneasy ghosts.

He found himself by the river, and stood watching the effect of the darkness and the light. It was the first really beautiful thing—except that one girl's dancing—he had seen in London, and it calmed his

perturbed spirit as only beauty could do. That the function of beauty is to calm, not to excite, Oliver believed profoundly.

He spent the next day wandering about London—discovering excellent little restaurants wherein he lunched and dined, and returned to his hotel quite early, exhausted by his long walk.

The day after he went to Northboro.'

His father had advised the mother, whom he had not seen for nearly a quarter of a century, that Oliver was coming to England and would write to her immediately on his arrival in London. This the grandson had done and by return of post had received a warm invitation to his father's old home.

Since Oliver's father had left Northboro' the Darnells had continued to prosper, and when the grandfather died (Oliver was about ten years old at the time) he was a wealthy man, as that phrase is understood in Northboro, which has a meaning of its own for certain words. His widow, as the years went by, loomed largely in the ecclesiastical life of the town, and the increasing years found her more devoted than ever to the outward symbols of her faith. She had very slowly come to appreciate the fact that her son had married a Chinese lady, a woman who was wholly unlike herself, and equally unlike her daughter Philippa. In the letter which announced his marriage Darnell had described his wife as a Christian, but Miss Winterburn had long since disillusioned Mrs Darnell on the point. Miss Winterburn, as far as abstract truth ever matters in these things, had been right; but her description of the strange mixture which passed with Sansi as religion had been as vividly wrong as it was unsettling to Mrs Darneil. At the back of the old lady's mind was a deep resentment that her son had not visited England and her for so many years. She

knew that as far as money was concerned he could have come, that indeed he was 'independent'; but the great fact remained that he had not come. And now, instead of her own son, her grandson—the son of a Chinese woman who was not even a Christian—was coming. Of course he *was* her grandson . . . that was the unsettling part of the whole affair. It was also, as far as the grandmother was concerned, the fact of primary importance.

'But what will people think?' Philippa had persisted. 'These . . . er . . . half-castes are always more conspicuous than the original people. Whatever will people say when we tell them that he's a relation?'

'He *is* a relation!' the mother replied sharply. 'He is Richard's son.' She did not like Philippa using such phrases as 'half-caste.'

'Richard!' . . . a quarter of a century's resentment was packed into one word by Philippa.

'He's as much my child as you are, Philippa!'

'He's *not*, mother! He's forfeited every right to be called your son. Why, you can't have the slightest notion of what he's like. And that *awful* wife.'

'I remember him as if it were yesterday he went!' the mother replied quietly.

'I don't! I shouldn't know him if I saw him.'

At that moment Margaret Halliday, a tall, fair girl, entered the room and the conversation between the mother and daughter came to an untimely end.

'Hallo, granny, dear!' she said, and bending over the old lady, kissed her.

'And dear little Philippa!' she laughed. 'It seems ages since I saw you . . . it *is* four hours nearly. But I'm in time for supper, as I told you . . . I've had a most topping time.' She tossed the tennis racquet and shoes she was carrying on to a chair, and sat on a hassock between the two elder women.

'You seem so frightfully serious,' she went on, looking from one to the other. 'I suppose it's about Oliver you've been worrying. But I suppose I ought to call him Mr Darnell. He's not really my cousin, is he?'

'No!' said Philippa decidedly. 'He isn't!'

Margaret Halliday, as far as that went, was nobody's cousin at all. She was twenty years of age, and from the time when she was six weeks old she had lived with Philippa, who had been 'more than a mother' to her (as Northboro' would have said). The two came together in an odd way. Philippa and several other ladies connected with St Jude's, the great church which dominated Northboro', started what they called a play-centre. To this centre mothers, who had to work in the factories, brought their babies and left them whilst they went to work. A professional nurse had been engaged, but the *crèche* was run to a great extent by the ladies of St Jude's, particularly those of them who had not achieved matrimony. These spinsters derived that mysterious pleasure from the babies which the good God allows to ladies of advancing years, and which no man quite understands.

One day a woman came to the *crèche* with a baby. Philippa Darnell was in charge and she took the mite in. As the woman had not been there before, her address was entered in a little book which existed for the purpose. This done, she handed the baby to Philippa, and stated she would be back for it at six o'clock. . . . She looked at the baby with one long, hungering look, and went.

She never came back.

Several times during the day Philippa looked down at the tiny baby. She had noticed that the mother wore no wedding ring, but that was not uncommon in Northboro'. 'It's a poor hen that can't scrat wi' one

chick,' is a phrase used often by the factory girls, as Philippa knew. It was the old story, she supposed . . . what Northboro', with a touch of unconscious poetry, referred to as a 'love-child.'

'Ah, well! Poor little mite!' Philippa sighed and turned away. It was all very terrible, very wrong, but the months during which she had taken part in the management of the *crèche* had shaken many of the old ideas out of her head. After all, these things *were*. It was no use shutting one's eyes to them.

Evening came and with it the mothers who took away their children.

The baby was the only one in the *crèche* now, and Philippa wanted to get away. It was a nuisance that the professional nurse was off duty that afternoon, she thought. As she waited, she sat by the side of the hygienic cot and watched the baby. Its eyes were open, and they were very blue. For a while the spinster sat watching her tiny charge, and still the mother did not come. Half-past six . . . the *crèche* closed at six, that was one of the rules. The address the mother had given was quite near and Philippa picked up the baby, wrapped it up warmly and set out with it. The mother was not known at the address . . . there was no baby belonging to any one in the house.

Quite uncertain what to do, Philippa stood in the road—a long unlovely road even for Northboro', where all roads are long and ugly. It was growing dark and there was no reply to her knock at the nurse's door. She stood there wondering. There was apparently nothing to do but to take the baby home with her. Obviously she could not leave it in the empty *crèche*, equally obviously she could not deposit it in the gutter. She really didn't know what to do with it at all, unless she *did* take it home. She had heard vaguely of handing derelict babies to the Poor Law authorities or the

police, but it seemed too utterly ridiculous to go up to a policeman and offer him a baby.

She took it home.

Mrs Darnell listened to her recital of the scenes of misadventure and then asked her what she was going to do with it.

'I don't know!' said Philippa. 'Poor little mite . . . what lovely eyes she has.' She remained looking down at the babe on her lap for a considerable time.

And so Margaret Halliday came to King's Oaks, the house where Oliver's father had been born. Halliday was the name the mother had given, and Margaret had always been Philippa's favourite name, and would have been the name of her own baby had she had one. Round her neck was a piece of ribbon with a little locket attached, containing a woman's portrait. Miss Darnell saw that it was the mother.

Twenty years later Margaret was still there and had interrupted the conversation between Philippa and old Mrs Darnell about Oliver, who, as her foster mother had said, was certainly not her cousin.

During the twenty years Margaret had lived with Miss Darnell no word was heard of her mother . . . a girl who apparently did not consider that she was able to 'scrat' for even one chick.

It was a curious thing to record, this absolute desertion of a blue-eyed baby. One hears so much of what is called the maternal instinct. In a normal environment, no doubt, it is very beautiful, and equally doubtless a great fact . . . perhaps the greatest fact in the world. But in spite of it the mother never came back to the *crèche*. . . . One thinks of her sitting alone in some corner wondering, that mother who lacked a wedding ring, wondering of the blue eyes of the baby who was no longer hers, but was flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone . . . and who certainly

had some connection with her soul (that is, of course, if a soul may exist where no wedding ring is); one pictures her thinking in the firelight, with the memory of baby fingers and baby lips crowding in out of the past. . . .

'An abandoned woman, a disgrace to her sex, heartless!' so Mrs Darnell said often in the early days. But Philippa rarely spoke of the mother. She remembered the way in which the woman had looked down at the baby when she went . . . and deep down in her soul she knew herself for a thief, argue as she would.

CHAPTER V

THE PRODIGAL'S DEPUTY

OLIVER's first impressions of Northboro' were received, as his Aunt Philippa carefully pointed out, when the town was at its very worst. It was in the half-light, the gray end of a day of drizzle and depression.

She met him at the station; she came up to him suddenly, a tall thin figure in black, as he stood looking up and down the platform expectantly.

'Er . . . Oliver?' she asked awkwardly.

'Yes!' he said diffidently. 'You are my Aunt Philippa, I suppose?'

'Yes!' she said. 'I have come to meet you. I'm afraid it's a most awful night. We'd better get along to King's Oaks as quickly as we can. The carriage is here. Your grandmother is awaiting you at home.'

She did not kiss him, but shook hands with the air of one who never kisses in public; and presently the two of them were in the carriage of which she had spoken with the quiet touch of pride which goes with a carriage in Northboro'. Little was said beyond the minimum of polite remarks. The aunt was thinking that this curiously strange young man, as utterly foreign, it seemed to her, as if he were from another world, was her own brother's son, with the same name as herself, that he indeed was the only one who could carry on that name. As the light of the street lamps they passed momentarily lit up the darkness of the carriage, she watched his face, seeking in it the signs of the strange blood in him. Any one, even the most typical of Englishmen, would have assumed a bizarreness

under such peculiar lighting effects, and Oliver's un-English characteristics—always more evident when he was tired as he was then—were inevitably heightened. As for Oliver, he was watching Northboro' as it slid by them in the night. The great, gaunt factories caught his imagination with their myriad windows of light, behind which the shadows of the workers passed and passed. These moving silhouettes and the hushed hum of the machinery were vivid in his mind. There was something implacable in the bulk of the factories, in their suggestion of tireless power, in the strength which was an inherent part of their brutal ugliness, which had its appeal to the artist to whom force and motion were mere aspects of beauty. He had seen factories in Japan, and from the train as he entered and left London, but not before had he seen factories in the peculiar environment of a factory town which they dominated and dwarfed. His mind was filled with sharp impressions of moving figures and vast rows of lighted windows. The rest of Northboro' gave him no emotion; the hurrying people and the dimly-lit, tiny shops, the gloom and the grayness, had lost their power of appeal to a mind stirred by the grim, looming strength of the factories.

'Of course, Northboro' is at its very worst on a night like this, Oliver,' his aunt said. Her voice seemed to come out of the darkness at a great distance.

'Naturally!' he replied politely, wondering why his aunt said, 'Of course.'

'You will find it very dull after London, I'm afraid,' she went on, with the peculiar tone of the provincial who depreciates the town he admires before all other towns; the peculiar tone which demands contradiction.

'It is different . . . certainly,' he said, with an unconquerable politeness which might have belonged to old Luen-chi himself.

'Of course, *we* think the world of Northboro,' she explained, with a touch of asperity.

'It is your home, Aunt Philippa. I think one always loves one's home.'

She became silent in the darkness of the carriage again. His home was in Hanchow, a great unknown, unknowable city of heathens, a monstrous distance away.

'The factories are very striking,' he said, when at last it seemed imperative that he should say something.

'They are some of the largest boot factories in the world, Oliver.' Again the touch of pride.

'So!' once more it might have been old Luen-chi himself. Oliver gave the word the same curious, long-drawn-out intonation that his grandfather did.

'Oh, yes, *quite* the biggest!' The intonation had startled her, and she jerked out the words nervously.

There was a stop and a series of jerks, and the carriage drew up at the steps leading to the front door of King's Oaks. Oliver alighted and assisted his aunt to do so, and then followed her up the steps to the open door. In the lighted hall his grandmother awaited him.

'This is Oliver,' Aunt Philippa said.

Mrs Darnell held out her hand and a little nervously Oliver took it.

The old lady stood looking at him searchingly, for long seconds, before she kissed him.

'Welcome . . . my dear boy!' she said at last. 'I wish your dear father had been with you; my happiness would have been complete. You must be hungry after your journey . . . supper will be ready almost at once.'

'Oliver would no doubt like a wash,' put in Philippa.

'Thank you, I should, very much,' said Oliver, who was visualising a very tedious week-end.

Eliza, a gaunt maid, apparently suffering from an excess of acidity, was deputed to show him to his room.

'Ere y'are, sir!' she said, as she threw the door open, and without unnecessary words she left him. He smiled to himself as he compared her with the silent servants of his own land.

He found himself, with a big mirror facing him, in the guest-room of the house, a room of uncompromising mahogany furniture. The window was closed and, as is the astounding English habit, blocked with a great dressing table. He opened it with difficulty, and looked out. King's Oaks stands on one of the two hills on which Northboro' has been built, and from it was an excellent view of the town. Everywhere through the trees around the house he saw the brilliantly lit factories; he was conscious again of an idea which had come to him in the cab, that the long rows of windows facing the night were living creatures.

Eliza awaited him in the hall when he descended.

'This way, sir!' she said, and ushered him into the dining-room where his grandmother and aunt awaited him. Margaret Halliday was seated in a low chair by the fire, and rose as he entered. He had no idea that any one else would be there, and his surprise was obvious to the three women. His father had never mentioned Margaret to him, if, indeed, he knew anything about her himself.

'This is my adopted daughter, Miss Halliday, Oliver,' said his aunt.

'How do you do, Mr Darnell?' said Margaret, who took her tone from Philippa's introduction.

Oliver bowed. 'I am quite well,' he said.

'Sit down, Oliver, sit here by me,' Mrs Darnell said. The party readjusted itself.

'You are like your dear father, Oliver,' the grandmother said. 'This is a photo of him when he

was about your age . . . no, he was a few years younger.'

She handed to Oliver a photo of a young man in cricketing flannels who was leaning stiffly against a photographer's preposterous tree.

'It is a good photo of him,' Oliver said.

'You would have recognised it?' The anxiety in the mother's words was obvious, particularly to Philippa.

'But yes. He looks older now, but I should have recognised the photo anywhere.'

'Of course, I have many other photos of him, some of them quite recent ones which he has sent me. And your mother too . . .'

'Dear little Sansi!' Oliver said.

'Sansi! . . . do you call her Sansi?' This from his aunt.

'I always have. I started it when I was a tiny mite, and I've just kept it up. Father likes it.'

Mrs Darnell had taken up an album of photos of the kind which is found in the house of every substantial citizen in Northboro', and was turning the thick, unwieldy leaves. She showed him several photos of his father, one when he was still in long clothes, a tiny, podgy fragment of humanity. She waxed reminiscent. Philippa looked on in silence, with tightly shut lips.

'I've never quite forgiven your father, Oliver,' she said at length, 'for going away. I often tell your grandmother so . . .'

'He would never have been happy in Northboro',' the old lady sighed. 'I don't know why. It had to be, I know.'

'He's lived his life, anyway,' put in Margaret.

'One can live one's life in Northboro', surely, dear!' Aunt Philippa pointed out, with a firmness which showed that she had no intention of arguing about the matter.

At that moment Eliza entered bearing a big dish with a roast leg of mutton on it. She was followed by another maid with vegetable dishes.

'I'm sure you are quite ready for your meal, Oliver,' the grandmother said as she rose.

'Will you sit here, Oliver?' Philippa asked pleasantly, and in a tone which was meant to imply that as far as *she* was concerned the sins of the father were not visited on the son.

It was a long table and Oliver found that his grandmother was on his right and his aunt opposite to him. The silver was old-fashioned, and in the middle of the table was a large bowl of daffodils which seemed curiously modern compared with the rest of the room. Mrs Darnell carved; she had carved since the day her husband died, and with the years the operation had assumed the nature of a ritual. Before she commenced she said briefly, 'Grace, Margaret, please!' The grace duly said, she took up the carvers and commenced.

'I'm afraid your first impression of Northboro' must have been rather unhappy,' said Margaret.

'It was most interesting,' he replied. 'It is my first experience of a factory town.'

'Do you like your mutton well done, Oliver?' his grandmother interjected.

'As it comes, grandmother, please,' he replied.

Philippa solemnly helped him to vegetables, and Margaret to gravy. As she passed the completed plate to him he thought for a moment that he detected the suspicion of a smile in Margaret's eyes, and wondered why it was there.

He talked during the meal of his life in Hanchow, of Sansi, and of Miss Winterburn, and he was a little amused at the old lady's only half-veiled efforts to ascertain the type of life led by her son. Margaret was deeply interested when he talked about Toyama,

and he offered to do a sketch of her on the following day.

'Of course,' Philippa put in, 'Margaret is also artistic.'

'I do not doubt,' said Oliver politely.

'She writes,' said Philippa complacently and comprehensively and with infinite satisfaction.

'But how splendid!' said Oliver.

'Just as an amateur,' said Margaret depreciatingly. 'I've had a few stories accepted by different magazines. Most of them come back to me though with heart-breaking regularity. I'm afraid I've caused an immense amount of regret in editor's offices.'

'You must let me read some of them,' Oliver said.

'If you care to . . . I've got the magazines. They seem better in print. I think it lends them almost a professional touch.'

'I do not like Margaret's stories!' said Mrs Darnell.

'So?' Again the long intonation which had startled Aunt Philippa. His grandmother looked sharply at him, attempting to fathom the meaning of the interjection.

'They are flippant,' she went on after a pause. 'There is nothing serious in them. "Life is real, life is earnest." She quoted the words as if they clinched her argument, settled the whole matter.

'But, grandmother, there is so much seriousness in life that people want to get away from it in magazines. Besides, whenever I'm serious the story doesn't sell.'

'More's the pity!' Mrs Darnell insisted. 'Modern life seems to me altogether *too* flippant. People have lost the old sense of duty, the old idea of right and wrong. No amount of flippancy can make wrong right.'

Margaret remained silent. She knew of old that it was quite impossible to argue with Mrs Darnell, who was a lady of ideas as fixed as the laws of the Medes.

The excellent mutton was followed by an equally

excellent apple-pie, and that by still more excellent Stilton cheese. The meal was uncompromisingly, pugnaciously, English . . . in its way there is no doubt that it was a good meal, and to Oliver it was an adventure, so strange was it. A Burgundy was the only wine (it was described by the wine dealer as 'sound table'), and at the end of the meal Mrs Darnell rose.

'Perhaps you will join us in the drawing-room when you have smoked, Oliver. You will find cigarettes in that box on the sideboard.'

Philippa and Margaret followed her from the room, and once again Oliver noticed that gleam in Margaret's eyes which might have been a smile.

Left alone, he lit a cigarette and pondered.

Mrs Darnell and Philippa were his relatives . . . perhaps because of it he took them for granted, certainly he gave them little thought. It was of Margaret he wondered . . . the 'adopted daughter.' Who was she? No clue to her identity had been offered to him.

He shut his eyes and saw her face again clearly; it was a knack he had learned in Toyama. In a sense she was beautiful, certainly her eyes were extraordinarily intelligent. She had a habit of looking one in the eyes with an absolute, contemplative unconcern which was a little disconcerting. Her beauty centred in her eyes, which still possessed the amazing blueness that Philippa had looked into twenty years before. There was a photo of her on the mantelpiece (together with the customary mass of vases and 'knick-knacks') and the photographer had caught the charm of her face. Oliver was not certain what the charm was . . . but he had no doubt of its existence. It was as if the face were on the point of smiling; as if it were *alive*.

It was hard to associate her with the dining-room, difficult to appreciate the fact that nearly the whole of her life had centred in the house which contained it.

It was a room which to him was incomprehensibly ugly. The furniture was solid, the kind of furniture which outlasts generations of men and is still 'good.' The big black clock ticked ominously amidst the mass of ornaments which were, in the main, hideously 'good,' —Mrs Darnell knew, and at the last provocation would tell one, the value of many of the more choicely ugly pieces. The pictures were . . . ghastly—but still 'good.' Oils, all of them daubs to sicken the soul of an artist, mainly 'picked up' at sales by Oliver's defunct grandfather. Subject pictures, 'cattle subjects,' imitation Landseers worse even than Landseer, deplorable and depressing, and framed in expensive and spacious gilt frames. It occurred to Oliver that a girl like Margaret should have influenced her environment more than she had done, that in twenty years she should have achieved the abolition of the toby-jugs, the lustre ware and the pictures. But he did not know the grandmother yet . . . these things had for her a sentimental value which transcended their considerable intrinsic worth; her household Gods were as fixed as her ideas . . . as all her other Gods.

As he glanced round he discovered in the corner a 'what-not' literally loaded with 'knick-knacks.' It made him laugh, and then suddenly, as he stood looking at it, he became serious with the odd gravity of Luen-chi. He had seen suddenly why his father had gone to China, to what odd trifles he (Oliver) owed his existence.

Presently he turned away and threw his cigarette into the fireplace. Shepherded by the ubiquitous Eliza, who was looking out for him in the hall, he joined the ladies who awaited him in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VI

MARGARET'S PROFILE

ON the first night of his visit Oliver was glad to adopt the custom of King's Oaks and retire early. His grandmother kissed him, but his aunt shook hands with a kind of bluffness which showed that there was nothing personal in her omission to kiss him, merely an objection on general grounds to an insanitary habit; it was quite a different attitude from the one she adopted in the station although it had a similar end in view.

Some considerable time after Oliver was asleep Margaret was still in Philippa's bedroom, where she usually went for a last talk away from the iron censorship of Mrs Darnell.

'What do you think of him?' Margaret asked.

'He makes me nervous . . . positively nervous,' the other replied. 'He seems so absurdly like us, so English, I mean, and yet at the same time he seems to belong to another world.'

'I suppose, in a sense, he does,' Margaret said thoughtfully.

'Does what?'

'Why, belong to another world. Look at the queer life he's led, half Chinese, half English. That quaint school he went to in Japan. And then he's an artist. It's all most awfully different from Northboro'. You can see that he is clever from his eyes.'

'I don't like the way he looks at me,' the elder woman said. 'I know that he's my brother's son, and my nephew, but he seems to look right into me. It

makes me shiver. It doesn't seem *natural* that he should be my nephew.'

Margaret laughed.

'He doesn't make me a bit nervous,' she said. 'I rather like him. Compared with other men I know he's frightfully interesting.'

'Interest isn't the most important thing in a man; I think these mixed marriages ought not to be allowed. Oliver is neither one thing nor the other, neither foreign nor English. It's . . . it's pathetic.'

'You can't stop these marriages,' Margaret protested. 'If Oliver's father loved Sansi—what a quaint little name, isn't it?—he would marry her if he cared, whatever you thought about it.'

'Oliver's father should never have gone gallivanting round the earth, and then he wouldn't have met this Sansi. His duty was here, in Northboro', where the women he would have met are civilised.'

'But the rest of the world is most awfully interesting,' Margaret said. 'And awfully attractive to one.'

'He could have read about it,' retorted the uncompromising Philippa. 'As it is, he's simply lost to us, to his mother, to whom, surely, he owed some *duty*.'

'I wonder what grandmother thinks of Oliver? You couldn't tell anything from her manner.'

'He's her own blood, my dear, and she'll stick up for him through thick and thin. In her eyes he's Richard's son, and that is all that she cares about. She says he looks absolutely English, but she ought to have seen him in the carriage when the lights of the street lamps fell on his face. He was Oriental, quite Oriental!'

'Well, of course, he *is* Oriental . . . in a sense.'

But whatever Mrs Darnell did think was as unknown to her daughter as it was to Margaret, unknown to all save herself. Whatever it was, she did not allow it

to disturb her night's rest, for even while her daughter and Margaret were talking, the old lady slept the dreamless sleep which is usually regarded as the perquisite of the just.

Oliver's cold bath the following morning amazed the establishment, which consisted of Eliza, a smaller maid, and an elusive cook. He had contracted the habit from his father, who had taken it to the ends of the earth with him, where, more than anything else, it had amused Luen-chi, who could not understand why it was necessary to wet the body all over each morning and then wipe the water off.

In the dining-room Oliver found Margaret and Eliza putting the finishing touches to the breakfast. Margaret was enveloped in a big and brilliant chintz pinafore, and smiled cheerfully at Oliver as he entered the room. In the morning light he thought she was very pretty ; Philippa and the spartan old lady joined them almost at once, and the English breakfast which followed was quite beyond Oliver. His porridge went away almost untasted—to his grandmother's obvious surprise. He chose a boiled egg in preference to bacon and eggs, and this, with a tiny piece of toast, was his breakfast.

'Are you unwell, Oliver?' his grandmother asked. Such a breakfast as Oliver had made argued in her mind a considerable degree of indisposition.

'No, thank you !' he said, a little puzzled.

'You've made such a poor breakfast,' she explained. Mrs Darnell was one of those sensible old ladies who thoroughly enjoy their nourishment.

'You would prefer the French breakfast?' Margaret suggested.

'I do not know it,' he said, still puzzled.

He made a mental note to have tea in future at Northboro'. The coffee was as English as the rest or

the meal, and, great as are our national virtues, the making of good coffee is not among them.

Afterwards, at Mrs Darnell's suggestion, he went into Northboro' with Margaret who was to 'show' it to him.

'Well, and what do you think of us, Mr Darnell?' she asked, as they turned down the hill to the town clustering beneath them. She smiled intimately at him as she asked the question.

'That is a difficult question,' he said. 'One thinks so many things.'

'You find us . . . provincial?'

'I know so little of this country,' he replied.

'We *are* most fearfully provincial. To us Northboro' is the hub of the universe.'

'That is natural, surely. Do you think you ought to call me Mr Darnell?' he went on. 'So few people do, and I suppose we are adopted cousins?'

'Aunt Philippa introduced you to me formally,' she said.

'May I call you Margaret?'

'Please do. Every one does. That is our town-hall.' She indicated a sombre building in gray stone. 'You don't like it?'

'No!' he said.

'I didn't think you would. It's hideous. But we are most frightfully proud of it. It cost thirty-five thousand pounds.'

'That is a lot of money,' he said. 'I'm afraid you indulge in irony, Margaret,' he added.

'You ought to have been here when it was opened,' she said. 'The Mayor and all the Big People were awfully solemn . . . civic dignity, you know, we call it in England.'

'I shall begin to think that you do not like Northboro',' he said questioningly.

'Like it!' she asked in surprise. 'I loathe it, with its nasty little dingy houses, and sordid little shops. It's like a great rabbit warren. Why grandmother insists on staying here I can't imagine, but nothing will induce her to move away from it.'

'This is the only little bit we have left of the old town,' she continued, indicating a little street which turned off the London Road, and which wandered up the hill towards St Jude's. 'Church Street,' she went on. 'It's really quaint in places. One house is three hundred years old.'

'It is quaint,' he admitted. 'I like it. But in this country do you value antiquity?'

'When it is beautiful,' she replied.

'Of course; but you apparently regard the age of these houses as a virtue.'

'It's a relief in Northboro' which is so terribly modern. No, I don't regard age as a virtue; these houses, for example, are horribly insanitary.'

'In my country,' he said, 'we are apt to regard age as a virtue.'

'I've read how conservative you are,' she said.

'Conservative?' He did not immediately grasp the word's meaning. 'Oh, yes. I see what you mean. Yes, we are.'

'I'm not,' she said.

'No?'

'I'm a revolutionary. Philippa doesn't know it, nor does grandmother, but I am.'

'In politics?' he asked, but without animation.

'No, generally. I think that things are wrong. In women's lives, for instance. We are shackled . . . just as the women in your country have their feet bound until they are deformed, and they can only hobble.'

'But they don't,' he pointed out.

'Well, they used to,' she insisted. 'It is all wrong. A man could get away from Northboro' like your father did. I can't. That is why I'm writing so desperately hard. If I were successful I could get away; Philippa knows it, and hopes that I won't. That's St Jude's. What do you think of it?'

'It is very big.'

'That's very faint praise!'

'It is not necessarily praise at all,' he said, with a laugh.

'No, I suppose it isn't.'

'I thought last night that the factories were very striking,' he said. 'By daylight they seem to have shrunk; and they are the ugliest things I have ever seen.'

'I hate them, by day or night. It seems horrible to me that people should be cooped up in them all day. How *can* they retain any sense of beauty through it? They are responsible for the ugliness of the people's lives. These gaunt factories seem to crush the very souls of the people.'

They had come to the top of the other hill, and from it they could see even more of Northboro' than from the one on which Mrs Darnell's house stood. They remained a while under the shadow of the great gray church, a modern monument to the wealth which its staple industry had brought to Northboro', or rather of the piety (which covers even more than charity) of those who controlled the wealth. Around them hundreds of chimney stacks affronted the blue sky, and it seemed wonderful that the air could absorb the volumes of black and dark gray smoke which the chimneys belched into it.

Mrs Darnell, like most of the inhabitants, was able to stand and admire the extraordinary growth of the town, and to note almost with personal satisfaction

that a still higher chimney stack protruded into the sky. But the effect of Northboro' on Oliver and the girl by his side, was to depress them. So much so, that they turned back into Church Street in silence.

Often Oliver glanced down to the profile of his companion. She was wearing a velvet tam-o'-shanter of saxe-blue which fitted closely to her head, like the hats worn by the students in Paris. Beneath it her fair hair showed in soft beauty, and Oliver noticed that the line of her neck and jaw was excellent. There was a wistfulness about the profile which reminded him, through some vague twist of imagination, of a picture by his old master in Toyama, a dainty nocturne in gray and blue.

It was the one thing in Northboro' which could have reminded him of Toyama.

They stopped a while at the Theatre Royal (why Royal none knew), and they were examining the play bills when a young man joined them.

'Hallo, Maggie!' He spoke without the accent of Northboro' and Oliver looked up from the bill he was reading to find the new-comer looking—glaring is the more exact word—at him.

'Let me introduce you,' Margaret commenced. 'Mr Morden, Mr Darnell. Oliver is Philippa's nephew,' she added.

'How d'you do?' Morden said, without any great interest. He was a good-looking, carefully-dressed boy of twenty-five, with a frank face and a complexion many a girl might have envied; the mouth and jaw were strong and quite redeemed the face from even a suggestion of effeminacy. Afterwards Margaret explained that he was the son of a local manufacturer and was just down from Cambridge. It needed no great insight on Oliver's part to see that he was very much in love with Margaret.

'You'd better walk up the hill with us,' said Margaret. 'You'll find Oliver a most extraordinary man. He's an artist.'

'Oh !' Morden replied.

He had the normal Englishman's dislike of an artist, a dislike which is part of his general dislike of anything he doesn't understand.

'Yes . . . he's been at an art school in Japan, Toyama. Isn't it a positively ripping name for an art school?'

'It is rather . . . odd,' Morden admitted. It struck him that he was perilously near making himself absurd, the most awful fate that can befall a man of twenty-five with his university experience behind him; the one thing which under no circumstances is 'done.'

'You must find Northboro' dull after Toyama,' he said. 'After Cambridge I find it intolerable !'

'It is . . . different,' Oliver said, as he had said to his aunt.

'By Jove, yes ! By the way, Maggie, how are your people?'

'Top-hole, Bobby, thanks. Oliver's doing a sketch of me this afternoon . . .'

'Good, I must see it . . .' Bobby replied stoutly, with no hint of his misgivings. Whether or not he deceived Margaret is doubtful. She knew quite well that he was in love with her—would have known it, indeed, if he had not told her so a hundred times, and it is at least possible that she understood the brave front he had put to his involved feelings.

They came to the gate of King's Oaks where Bobby left them. A gentle pressure when Margaret shook hands with him, calmed his misgivings a great deal. 'See you soon, old thing,' she said. The two men shook hands cordially.

'A very good-looking young man,' Oliver said.

'Do you think so?' Margaret replied, as they walked up the steps to the front door together. 'He's quite a nice boy, anyway. A tiny bit conceited, perhaps, but a little of that is to the good. Every one's conceited.'

The sketch of which Margaret had spoken to Bobby Morden was done in charcoal during the afternoon. The heavy damask curtains of the drawing-room were drawn as wide apart as was possible, and Oliver posed his adopted cousin in this maximum of light. Mrs Darnell sat in state watching his extraordinary facile pencil, and gasping a little as she watched the likeness—which was all she was looking for—come into the sketch. Philippa knitted grimly; her curiosity impelled her to glance now and again at the sketch, although there was something *intimate* about the whole idea which disturbed her.

The drawing of Margaret was in profile, and Oliver had never been more interested in a subject. The light of the north window he had chosen touched the tender beauty of the girlish face to glory, and Oliver was quite lost in his work. But not once did he achieve the impersonal, detached interest in his subject which he had always done before. The beauty in his work—and in the face—was intensely personal to him, intensely different from the beauty he had learned to discern in a spray of cherry-blossom or a bunch of water-reeds, those classic models of Toyama. Not once did Margaret speak . . . she was the perfect model, as perfect, indeed, as a blossom spray.

'It is not good,' he said, when he had finished. 'It does not do you credit . . .'

Margaret, a little stiff, crossed to the sketch.

'But it is beautiful,' she said. 'You are a genius, Oliver. It's beautiful, and in some extraordinary way it's like me; it is really—look Philippa.'

'It certainly is like you, Margaret,' Mrs Darnell said. 'It flatters you, though . . .' The old lady held the ancient faith that correctives are good for the young.

'And you, Philippa, what do you think of it?' Margaret asked, a little excitedly.

'I think that Oliver is very clever indeed,' said his aunt, which committed her to very little.

'It is nothing,' said Oliver.

'And it is mine?' Margaret asked eagerly.

'If you will have it,' the artist replied.

'It's too lovely. What frame shall I put it in . . . a tiny gilt one? plain, about a quarter of an inch wide?'

'Black would be better, I think,' Oliver said.

'Then black it shall be. I think it's wonderful, Oliver, wonderful.'

'It is certainly clever,' said Aunt Philippa again. 'I wonder where you get your cleverness from, Oliver. . . . Your father was not . . .'

'Oliver's father was an able man,' put in Mrs Darnell, with unmistakable firmness. 'I am not surprised that Oliver is clever. Not the least little bit in the world. My side of the family has brains, Philippa, as well as your dear father's.'

'I'm afraid you are all most terrible flatterers,' said Oliver. 'It is only a poor little sketch, after all.'

Oliver stayed over the week-end.

On the Sunday morning he went to church with his grandmother and aunt, and he listened with grimly shut lips to a missionary sermon in which his relatives were referred to as heathens who *must* be 'saved.' It was the obvious duty of Northboro' to save them, and the collection went to that end.

No comment was made either on the service or the sermon, and in the afternoon Oliver and Margaret went for a walk to Tiley Mill, a pretty place on the river three miles away from the tram terminus. Morden

awaited them—to Oliver's disappointment. He had looked forward very much to their walk, and the meeting had very little appearance of spontaneity. But Oliver had to put up with it, and the two men did most of the talking during the walk. Tiley Mill was seen and admired, and the three returned to the tram terminus, where Morden left them, with obvious reluctance.

After supper in the evening Margaret sang, 'Abide With Me,' in Liddle's setting, which Oliver thought very beautiful, and 'Ave Maria,' about which he was not so enthusiastic. In King's Oaks music was sternly secular or religious, and secular music did not obtrude into the Sabbath. Mrs Darnell, in very stiff black silk, presided over the evening, even when she was silent for half an hour on end. From where Oliver sat he could watch Margaret's profile in the candle-light as she played. Its wistful gentle beauty satisfied him, satisfied the deep craving for beauty that was in him.

'Where is death's sting?
Where, Grave, thy victory?'

In her soft mezzo voice she sang the words without any great expression, sang them as one who had sung them often before. The words touched responsive chords in Oliver . . . this beauty, this wonderful ethereal profile, would become old, haggard . . . would die. Only Art defied the grave. Art which caught such beauty as Margaret's and made it eternal; Margaret herself would lose it . . . would become as other old ladies . . . as his grandmother.

'Fast falls the eventide,'

the wonderful hymn had said. And yet there was a beauty about the eventide . . . soft blues and grays

and quiet leaves falling . . . swans silent on silent water . . .

'Thank you!' he said at the end.

Monday was one of those mornings which are the peculiar glory of our—on the whole—infamous climate. Even Northboro' air was exhilarating, and Oliver would have sung in his bath, if it were not for disturbing the rest of the house. It was early, and had there been any country in the immediate vicinity he would have gone out before breakfast. As it was, he found Margaret in the breakfast-room, with the riotous chintz pinafore, and her cheeks beautiful with a faint morning flush. She was arranging daffodils in the big glass bowl on the table.

'You *are* an early bird,' she said, looking up from the flowers as he entered.

'I'm glad I'm early, since I find you,' he said, with a gravity which struck Margaret as the first really un-English thing she had noticed about him.

'That's very sweet of you, Mr Oliver,' she said.

'*Mr* Oliver?' he questioned.

'Well, Oliver, then. And so you go back to London to-day?'

'Yes,' he said, after a pause.

'I wish I were going to London like you are, to work, I mean,' Margaret added. He sat in an enveloping arm-chair and she stood by the table, aimlessly holding the daffodils.

'But you are happy here?'

'As far as I can possibly be happy in Northboro'. I know I'm fearfully ungrateful to Philippa, but I *am* so tired of the place, the long ugly streets and the great overpowering factories . . . and the people. They're so horribly narrow, so suspicious of everything that's new . . .'

'Narrow?' He repeated the word as he usually did when he did not quite grasp the meaning.

'Intellectually, I mean. Every one is struggling for money, and more money, confusing the means with the end. They judge a human being merely by the amount of his money. And they are so *satisfied* with it all. If they go to London they would compare Westminster Abbey disparagingly with St Jude's. They don't think; they've no ideas; they're stuffy; and, if you do anything a tiny bit out of the ordinary, they're shocked, and the women go whispering among themselves about it like a lot of silly sheep.'

'Yes, Airlee . . . a man I met in Hong-Kong—told me how easily they were shocked. It is a pity.'

'So you see that's why I want to go to London. Philippa hates the idea. I believe it's because the dear is so fond of me. . . . But still, I know some girls who live in Richmond, and I may get a holiday with them this year; but they have a flat, and in Northboro' a flat sounds immoral. However, I musn't bore you with my silly little troubles the morning you return, or you won't come to see us again.'

'You want me to come again?' he asked, and for all the impassive element in his blood there was eagerness in his question.

'Of course. One sees so few people in Northboro' who have ideas beyond the town.'

'Then I shall most certainly come,' he said.

'Don't you love daffodils, Oliver?' she asked, suddenly breaking away from the train of thought she had been following.

'But yes . . . all flowers are beautiful. I like all beautiful things, all. . . . It was in Toyama that the beauty of a flower was taught to me.'

'There is precious little beauty in Northboro'.'

'There are many kinds of beauty, many aspects of beauty at least,' he said.

'In Northboro'?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'In Northboro'.' His eyes were on her face as he spoke, but her eyes dropped to the flowers, the arrangement of which he had interrupted.

'Green and gold,' she said. 'Nature never makes a mistake. If only people would copy Nature's colouring in their dress and homes . . .'

'Yes. We are remote from Nature, we moderns. Sometimes I think it is a pity, but I am not sure. We can rarely be ourselves. We are the slaves of conventions which people have invented . . . but, as I say, it may be for the best . . .'

'To be slaves?'

'Yes, of some things,' he replied.

'Not of silly conventions, surely?'

'Every convention once had reason behind it. When the reason has gone, leaving only the dry husk of the convention, wise people ignore it.'

'Not if the wise person is a woman!' she said.

'To a great extent even then,' he said.

'Ah, you are not a woman, Oliver . . . and you do not live in Northboro'.'

'That is true,' he said, with a laugh.

At that moment Philippa entered. She glanced from Margaret to Oliver before she greeted them.

'You're both up very early,' she said. 'But it is a most delightful morning. Did you sleep well, Oliver?'

'Thank you, Aunt Philippa, splendidly. I always do.'

They talked of nothing in particular until Mrs Darnell—and breakfast—appeared, and during the meal Margaret wondered why it was so easy—even before breakfast—to discuss things with Oliver. She visualised the result of any serious attempt at conversation before breakfast in a Northboro' home, and smiled.

When he said farewell to his grandmother, Oliver noticed that she was crying, and his thoughts sprang back to that far-off day when Luen-chi had broken down.

'Good-bye, dear,' the old lady said. 'I can't tell you how glad I have been to have you. You will come just as often as your work will let you, won't you? So long as I have a home, Oliver, it is yours.'

'Thanks ever so much, grandmother.'

'As often as you like, and as long as you like, Oliver.'

She was still weeping quietly when she kissed him—why, he did not know. Philippa looked on grimly.

His aunt and Margaret came to the station with him.

'Come again, soon, Oliver,' Margaret said, as the train was starting.

And most of the way to town Margaret's face and his grandmother's tears were curiously mixed in his mind.

After Oliver's departure Margaret and Philippa went quietly back to King's Oaks. Margaret went to her little white bedroom at once, and sat down in a low chair to think. Oliver had been to her a breeze from the spaces of the outer world. He had come from the ends of the earth, had known cities and strange religions and men; he was nearer genius than any other man she had met, and ideas flowed in his talk. It was inevitable that the girl who yearned for those outer spaces should be profoundly affected by his irruption into her life, and she attempted to analyse the emotions he had called up in her. It is common to all her sex, this analysis, but the results arrived at, although frequently interesting, are rarely valuable. It could not be otherwise.

What Margaret was unable to understand was the feeling—she hesitated to give it a name, so infinite, as she knew, are the grades of emotion—the feeling,

almost of repulsion, which tintured her interest and admiration. It was due, she never doubted, to the strange blood in him. But why should she be conscious of this repulsion—she could find no other word. After all, one race was as good as another; she had long since tired of the emptiness which passed in Northboro' as patriotism. The Chinese, she knew, were an ancient people, and had possessed a civilisation when her ancestors painted their skins with woad. They were a wonderful people, pacifist and modest. All this she knew, and yet behind it, unexplained by all her reasoning, was the faint sub-acid tincture of repulsion.

She could not understand it.

She met Bobby Morden in the afternoon.

'Hallo, Maggie!' he greeted her. 'I suppose Darnell's gone?'

'Yes,' she said, without emotion of any kind in her voice, although she had noticed the satisfaction in his.

'A queer kind of chap, don't you think?' he asked.

'No, I don't!' she said coldly.

'You know,' Bobby went on, 'I don't like the idea of your being with him . . . I don't like a yellow streak in a man. I can't help it. I know he's your cousin, and all that.'

'I think you are as abominably narrow as the rest of this wretched town,' she retorted. 'And I won't have you speaking to me as if I were a child you were responsible for. I'll talk to whomsoever I like. And I happen to be quite interested in Oliver.'

'It looks like being a cheerful afternoon,' he commented. 'I tell you what I think, and it's what nineteen Englishmen out of twenty would think, and you promptly lose your temper, Maggie. No man would like a girl he . . . eh . . . loved, to be about with a man who was half Chinese.'

'I know exactly what nineteen Englishmen out of

twenty would think . . . they don't think at all, as a matter of fact; they are sheep. Anyway, Oliver *is* individual; he isn't like nineteen out of every twenty.'

'You seem an enthusiastic defender of Darnell, Maggie.'

'Well, I hate to hear you sneering about him now that he's gone. Nationality is an accident. He can't help having a Chinese mother any more than you can help being born in Northboro', and being English.'

'I know that, dear, but nationality is a great fact, even if it is accidental, as you say. And instinctively a white man hates to see a white woman with a coloured man, particularly . . . if he's in love with the woman, as I am with you.'

'It's simply too absurd of you to call Oliver a coloured man,' she protested. 'In appearance he's as English as you are . . . and with it he has the cleverness of the East. The sketch he did of me was wonderful, a work of genius.'

'Yes. But I hated, loathed, to think of his sitting looking at you as he made the sketch; I was thinking of it all the afternoon.'

'You talk like a schoolboy, Bobby,' she said, and for the first time, a touch of friendliness came into her words. 'You *are* a schoolboy,' she went on.

'I'm five years older than you, old Maggie,' he said, seizing on the friendliness.

'In years,' she parried. 'Only a boy would show his jealousy. And after all the years you have spent at Cambridge! They ought to be told to include the control of one's feelings in the curriculum.'

'I say,' he commenced. 'You are not fair. It isn't jealousy.'

'What is it, then?' she challenged.

'Instinct,' he said stubbornly, and she made no reply. She was thinking of the curious feeling of repulsion which Oliver had called up in her, but of this, woman-like, she made no mention to the boy at her side.

CHAPTER VII

DULCIE WHITTINGHAM

OLIVER was very lonely in the big hotel breakfast-room the following morning. He was thinking of the breakfast at King's Oaks, solid, insular, and enormously sustaining, and of the girl who was in all probability sharing it at the moment with his grandmother and aunt.

He visualised Margaret quite clearly. She would have discarded the chintz apron and probably be wearing a white frock, the soft lines of which he had noticed and admired. The light from the big window would be behind her, making the gold of her hair alive. In the cavernous hotel breakfast-room he saw her as clearly as when he had sat near her in his grandmother's dining-room, saw the funny little expression in her eyes when she looked at him, and wondered, as he had wondered before, if it harboured a silent laugh.

His own breakfast table became remote, the coffee in his cup lukewarm. He was recalled sharply from his reverie by a fat little man who was asking him if the chair opposite him was engaged.

'No . . . no,' said Oliver.

'Every other table's booked,' the little man explained. He was theatrically attired and the loudness of his clothes 'went' admirably with his tiny eyes and cunning, receding forehead.

He was garrulous, but when the waiter came he ceased to talk to Oliver and brought his mind to bear on the immediate, and, to him, obviously important question of food. He ordered a very large meal, his little eyes glinting up from the menu to the waiter.

Whilst he was waiting he went on talking in an intimate, familiar way to Oliver, who, with the exception of a few affirmative and negative noises, was silent.

The little man was 'interested' in certain stage productions. He talked intimately of famous actors and actresses, and used their Christian names. . . . Jimmy This and dear little Mary That. The names were quite unknown to Oliver, who was taking a great dislike to the obtrusive and ugly little man. He wanted to be alone, to visualise Margaret's profile again and again, and not to be told that poor Billy Jevons 'bent his elbow too much.'

At last the burdened waiter came, and set the little man's food out in orderly array before him. It contrasted strangely with the remnant of Oliver's chaste meal. The loudly-dressed little fellow ate with gusto and noise, and Oliver was glad to abandon his nearly-cold coffee and escape.

Margaret was persisting in his mind as no other woman had ever done. He remembered vividly a hundred little intimacies of hers, mannerisms and phrases; and always in his mind lingered the wistful beauty of the profile he had sketched.

On his way to the reading-room—he was certain of silence there—he glanced at the letter rack and, a little to his surprise, he found a letter addressed to him. The handwriting was unfamiliar. In the deserted reading-room he read :

17 WALKER STUDIOS,
CHELSEA, S.W.

'DEAR MR DARNELL,—I received your note, and I have already heard from Mr Airlee about your visit. I shall be very pleased to see you here on Tuesday evening between six and seven. If that does not fit

in with your arrangements, perhaps you will write to me again.

‘Yours faithfully,
‘DAVID TROLLOPE.’

It was at Airlee’s suggestion that Oliver had written to Trollope, and he was delighted to find that his old master had also written.

‘He knows everything about Paris and London which matters either to him or you,’ Airlee had said. ‘You will come to love him. I’m certain that, somewhere in his life, he has met with a great sorrow. Most people whom one can love have done so. Also, Oliver, he is a great artist.’

Oliver had made no arrangements of any kind and was waiting until he saw Trollope before he did so. He had considerable difficulty in finding Walker Studios, and discovered number seventeen at the end of a long and very imperfectly lit passage, in which it was necessary to strike matches to read the numbers on the doors.

Trollope replied to the knock himself. He was a tall man, with white hair and dark eyes; the whiteness of his hair was startling in the sombre passage.

‘Mr Darnell?’ he asked, with a smile. ‘Come along in. Any friend of Airlee’s is welcome here. We were students together years ago in Paris.’ He shook Oliver’s hand warmly, and led the way into the studio.

‘I’m in the midst of making myself sufficiently presentable to venture out,’ Trollope explained.

Oliver looked round the studio with interest.

‘I shan’t be five minutes, if you will excuse me so long,’ Trollope said, and disappeared into the little room beyond the studio which served him for bedroom. Left alone, Oliver, a little amused at his curious welcome, examined the studio. A great window on the far side was shaded now that the lights were on. In the middle,

a model throne stood out prominently, and near it a very dirty easel on which stood an unfinished picture of a girl. A few arm-chairs and stacks of frames and pictures, together with a big anthracite stove, completed the simple furniture of the studio. On the walls here and there were pictures by different men, and Oliver walked slowly round examining them. There was one by Airlee . . . good, within the limitations of the art master, and a striking and very unorthodox one by Nevins, who had then still to make his name. It was the first picture of the Modern School which Oliver had seen, and, despite the power in it, and the artist's obvious capacity for drawing, Oliver did not like it. It was tremendously unlike the work of the Japanese, alien to all the traditions of Toyama.

'Do you know his work?' Trollope asked, as he rejoined Oliver, who was still looking at the picture.

'No . . . it's quite new to me.'

'It is new . . . that is its virtue.'

'I don't quite like it,' Oliver said.

'Nor do I . . . but I am old, and old men who are wise hesitate to condemn what is new.'

'And I suppose I'm Oriental.'

'Yes, Airlee told me in his note, although from your appearance and speech I should not have noticed it. It is most interesting. You unite an ancient civilisation with a modern . . . well, I'm afraid I don't know the word. We are hardly a civilisation . . .'

'But, surely, Mr Trollope . . .'

'Well, anyway, it's a virtue, I believe, to possess the possibilities of two races. I'm Scotch, like Airlee, all Scotch; I find it a drawback.' He spoke with elaborate seriousness in his deep velvety bass voice, but there was a twinkle in his dark old eyes.

'My father warned me to expect a certain amount,

of prejudice against the Chinese blood in me. You apparently do not agree with him?'

'I'm afraid I do. I was speaking as an artist. Personally I've always envied people with Jewish blood in them, although I'm quite aware of the prejudice to which you refer. It's the race instinct, I suppose. Originally it was caused, I do not doubt, by the men of a tribe wishing to keep their women to themselves and consequently cursing all other tribes. But in spite of this prejudice, I think you are lucky to be linked with two civilisations. By the way, are you engaged this evening?'

'No,' Oliver said.

'Then you had better come along to Hutton's studio with me, after grub.'

'I shall be very pleased.'

'A dozen or so of us dine each evening at seven o'clock, at a café in the King's Road. You've not dined, of course?'

'Again, no,' said Oliver.

'Good! We will go. My hat and stick, and I am ready.'

'Is Mr Hutton an artist?' Oliver asked, as they walked along.

'Not exactly. He has temperament, many things indeed, but he cannot paint; and like the wise man he is, he doesn't try. He is in the City, where he makes much more money than most men who are merely artists. It is so in England. He likes to live in a studio and to mix with artists. But above all, he loves to talk about "Philistines" . . . That also is an English habit.'

'By the way, I shall be wanting a studio,' Oliver said.

'There are many in Chelsea, along now. There will be no difficulty. It is best to go to the agent in the King's Road.'

The little café was some way along the King's Road.

It was very plain, very clean, and very French; the tables at the far end were filled with noisy men whose attire proclaimed their occupation to the world. Flowing ties and velvet and corduroy jackets were the dominant notes of the assembly; most of those gathered together were talking incessantly; a volume of words rolled away from them into the body of the café.

A chair had been left for Trollope—several there greeted him as he entered—and space was made at his side for Oliver, who was deeply interested in his companions, the first Occidental artists he had met. There were one or two girls with them; they were apparently listening to the orgy of words around them.

After the meal Oliver and Trollope made their way through drab Chelsea streets to the studio where the City man lived.

The outer door was open and Trollope went straight in. Immediately inside was a tiny hall or vestibule, in which they left their coats. The hall led into the studio itself, a big room, three times as big as Trollope's.

A dozen people who were sitting round the room, on chesterfields or on huge cushions, hailed the old painter. Trollope, with a smile and a little wave of an eloquent hand, replied to them collectively, and led Oliver up to a man of thirty or so who was standing by the large open fireplace.

'Let me introduce Hutton . . . Mr Darnell . . . a painter from China.'

'I heard from Trollope that you were coming,' Hutton said. 'I'm most awfully glad to meet you. I'm very interested in things Chinese. . . . I'll show you some of my treasures afterwards. Almost everything in the studio is Chinese. A quaint idea, don't you think?' He spoke in a quick, perky way.

'Oh, quite!' said Oliver.

He was introduced to the men who had been talking to Hutton, both of them painters.

The talk became technical at once, and in a little time Oliver found himself in the midst of a description of Toyama, which greatly interested his listeners. Afterwards Hutton told them of some Chinese pictures he had bought (at an absurdly cheap price, he assured them), and asked Oliver to see them. From the way he spoke of them it was obvious that he was of those who spend laborious hours hunting down 'bargains.'

Some one at the other side of the room started the pianola with startling suddenness, and Hutton's almost lyrical description of his pictures was cut short. The music was the inevitable ragtime, and several people commenced to dance.

'You dance?' Trollope asked.

'No!' Oliver replied.

'Then we'll sit here and watch.' He indicated a low black chesterfield in a dimly-lit corner.

Hutton and the men with whom Oliver had been talking, were dancing. It was a ragtime which would have passed unnoticed in Surbiton, but the way the men held the girls was a revelation to Oliver. Again the most striking thing to him about the women was their amazing lack of reticence. One girl he noticed, with flaming copper hair, was smoking as she danced. There was an abandon, or at least what appeared to be an abandon, in her attitude which astounded him.

'What are these girls?' he asked.

'Mixed,' Trollope replied. 'All of them more or less respectable. That little brunette, for example, is the most imaginative model I have met out of Paris. She is, unhappily, quite a vogue at the moment, and I can't always get her. I think it would pay a young man to marry her.'

'And that girl with the copper hair? . . .' pursued Oliver, on whom Trollope's little joke was lost.

'She is by way of being a painter herself. At least she has a charming studio where she wastes good pigment and canvas. You may like her. She's quite intelligent, and for some strange reason is Hutton's fiancée.'

'Why should that be amazing—if I am not indiscreet?'

'There are no indiscretions between equals, my dear Darnell, although there may be discretions. I hardly think that they will make anything out of their marriage. I don't see what either can gain from it.'

'But they are both artistic—a loose term, but you know what I mean.'

'Quite. They are in many ways excellently suited, but I've got the feeling that like so many other well-meaning people who are excellently suited to each other, they will simply spoil things by getting married.'

'That is cynicism,' said Oliver.

'Partly,' admitted Trollope, and a smile lit his face. Oliver noticed that when his companion smiled his face became absurdly youthful, and his white hair utterly incongruous. He had never seen a face in which a smile made so much difference.

'Some one defined a cynic as a grown-up child who has cut its doll open,' Oliver said. 'I saw it quoted in a paper.'

'That's simply wrong,' Trollope replied, with a sudden touch of gravity which made Oliver think he had stumbled on something personal. 'I think a cynic is one who is free from illusion.'

'I do not envy him his freedom,' said Oliver.

'Nor I,' replied Trollope, still with the curious gravity in his tone which had startled Oliver.

The dance came to an end with the pianola roll, and the dancers sought the chesterfields and cushions. Hutton came up with his fiancée to where Oliver and Trollope were sitting.

'Hallo, Troll !' she said.

'Hallo, Dulcie !' he replied, making room for her at his side.

Hutton introduced Oliver, who rose and bowed, and sat down again; his carefulness was so unlike the free and easy manners of the men she knew that Dulcie was amused. Behind her copper hair was a dull black curtain which made it like fire. Her brown eyes were flecked with red, and Oliver saw that they were full of light. She wore a daring and very *décolleté* black frock, which was designed to throw into prominence her beautifully moulded arms and shoulders. Oliver noticed that her eyes narrowed themselves when she laughed. A hint of strength around her mouth showed that she had controls somewhere in reserve, and one imagined that she belonged to a type which would either have great need of them, or none whatever.

Hutton appeared to flutter round her . . .

'You don't dance, Mr Darnell . . . no?' she asked.

'I'm afraid I don't,' he said.

'Ah, you must. Every one dances. I must teach you.'

'Thank you, but . . . I had much rather watch. It is all so strange, so bizarre . . .'

'You don't know London?'

'Not at all,' he said. 'Hong-Kong, Hanchow, Toyama, I know, but not London. Here it is different.'

'You will get used to us,' she laughed, and again he noticed the narrowed glint of her eyes as she did so. She seemed all movement . . . mobile like reeds on a wind-swept lake at Toyama. 'You mustn't imbibe Troll's cynicism,' she warned him later. 'It's only a pose with the old sinner, isn't it, Troll?'

'If my lady pleases,' the white-haired painter replied. 'Nearly everything is a pose in modern life, so why not my alleged cynicism. One must be in the mode!'

About eleven o'clock a meal which was described as

'coffee' was provided. Everybody helped in its preparation. Hutton supervised the actual coffee-making, convinced, like most of his countrymen, that he had the secret of the art. Sandwiches were cut, and muffins toasted; the guests sat around casually when at last the repast was ready. There were half a dozen centres of talk, and Oliver found himself isolated on a big cushion with Dulcie Whittingham.

'Yes, you must certainly learn to dance,' she said, as she nibbled a tiny cake, and as if no interval had elapsed since their last talk.

'You like dancing?' Oliver was politely conversational.

'Passionately!' Her eyes met his suddenly. He freed his captured glance at once.

'You must drop into my studio,' she went on easily. 'Most afternoons you'll find odd people who have drifted in for tea. I'm at Number Five, Brook Studios, quite near Troll's.'

'I shall be pleased,' he said, veiling his awkwardness.

'From what I hear of you, you'll find me a sorry amateur,' she continued. 'Troll said you were most awfully clever.'

'He is flattering me.'

'Don't you like being flattered? I do,' she said, with a little tinkling laugh. She laughed beautifully. With her, laughing was an art, even if painting were not.

'It is a universal failing,' he said. 'May I get you more coffee, Miss Whittingham?'

'Thanks, no! I wish Ronny were not so confident about his powers as a coffee-maker. This is execrable. You know, Mr Darnell, the moment you came into the room to-night, I knew that you were different . . . I was *conscious* of you.'

'Different?' He repeated the word helplessly.

'Yes, from the men one usually meets in Chelsea.'

'But I hope I am not so widely different. Like them, I hope one day to be an artist.'

'Oh, apart from art, I mean. The ordinary Englishman has a hide-bound mind. I'm convinced that you are broader, less insular, if you know what I mean.'

'I'm afraid I don't. I'm very stupid.'

'Your training—that jolly place in Japan, Toyama, wasn't it—your ancestry, are all so widely different from those of the men one knows. . . . Don't you find a fascination in strange, new things, Mr Darnell?'

He was uncomfortably conscious that her eyes were on his face.

'I like new things, new places, and people . . . of course,' he said.

'That's what I mean. I saw that you were different . . . strange almost, although that sounds horrid.'

'Not at all,' he murmured, quite carried away by the line Dulcie's conversation had taken.

'What do you think of Ronny's studio . . . the Chinese pictures and curtains and so on?' She jerked the talk from one thing to another as silly women jerk their dogs.

'It is complimentary of him to me, to my race, I mean.'

'You speak as if you were really Chinese.'

'So I am . . . the essential me, is.' The Chinese part of him appeared a weapon of defence against some vague subtlety which he feared in the girl at his side.

'I don't *think* of you as Chinese, Mr Darnell. In spite of the difference in you, your appearance is as English as any of the men here.'

'I'm afraid you flatter, even as you love to be flattered.'

'Isn't there a touch of irony in that?' she asked, with a smile.

'No,' he answered solemnly.

'You know I think this Chinese scheme of decoration of Ronny's is merely silly; I've told him so, of course.'
'But why . . .?'

'I don't mean it isn't successful, and beautiful; it is. But Ronny is so utterly out of keeping with it.'

'He is not Chinese, certainly,' admitted Oliver. 'If it comes to that, several of the things in the studio, I'm afraid, are not Chinese either. That cabinet, for example, is very beautiful, but it is not Chinese.'

'What a joke! I must tell Ronny. He's been diddled.'

'Diddled?' Oliver repeated.

'Yes, cheated; it's a slang word. He'll be most awfully annoyed.'

'Then I shouldn't tell him,' suggested Oliver. 'Surely it is unnecessary.'

'I must. It's too funny for words. He poses as an authority on things Chinese. He's such a fearfully smart business man that it's delicious to find that he's been diddled.'

'Perhaps I should not have mentioned it,' Oliver said. 'I really would rather you did not repeat it.'

'As you will,' she said. 'I don't mind, of course, but I do love to get one in on Ronny.'

All of which succeeded in making Oliver wonder.

After the meal had been cleared away by the co-operative method which had produced it, Oliver found himself alone with Trollope.

'Well?' Trollope asked.

'It is well,' Oliver replied.

'What do you think of this little cameo of London life, Darnell?'

'I think that the people here might be anything . . . I mean that there is no reason, except one or two bizarre costumes, why all these men shouldn't be City men like our host. There is no evidence of art here, particularly in the women.'

'In some respects, some of the girls here are finished artists,' Trollope said thoughtfully. 'Although most of them are either playmates or playthings, without any great sincerity. But some of them are artists: Dulcie, for instance.'

'I thought . . . "wasted pigment and canvas" was your phrase.'

'Ah, yes! She is not a painter, but she is still a finished artist, in a subtler medium even than paint. . . . Sex.'

'Sex an art?' asked Oliver, puzzled.

'Yes, our civilisation has become so complex that, to the really modern woman, sex is an art. You must have noticed that the first thing which strikes one about the girls here, about western women generally, is their sex. In Dulcie's case you can't help being conscious all the time that she is a woman. She forces the knowledge on you, and if that forcing is done superlatively well it becomes, as I say, an art.'

'It depends whether the emphasis is crude or subtle?' Oliver asked.

'Precisely. The artist is subtle. You have seen the crudest in the streets.'

'This is all very horrible to me,' Oliver said. 'Horrible, I mean, because it is so grotesquely strange. In my country women do not brandish their sex in men's faces. In London it seems impossible to get away from this all-pervading suggestion of sex, the shop-windows, the girls' faces, everywhere, in the theatre even.'

'The theatre,' Trollope laughed. 'Save for one or two forlorn optimists, the modern English theatre has been given over to sex. It is extremely rare to find a play worth sitting out. It's sex, sex, sex, all the time; and usually it's so damned unsubtle.'

'Since I've been in London I quite understand why the Mohammedans veil their women,' said Oliver.

'They distract one from one's work. It is not so in China. There women are not always pushing themselves into one's lives.'

'It's quite understandable,' said Trollope. 'The ordinary woman's main business in life is to get married. I sometimes think it is a pity, but it is so, even yet. It isn't a matter of economic pressure. Many of them will leave a good job to marry a poor man. That is why she butts into your life. That's quite as it should be, but these women here are not of the type which marry at all. Few of them would be attracted by the ordinary humdrum married life; look at their faces. It's excitement they want, and excitement to them, broadly speaking, means a man. Hence the elaboration of sex, hence the dainty emphasis of every difference between them and us. But you must bear in mind that these . . . butterflies . . . are quite unlike the mass of decent, reticent English women. They are a type apart, their dissatisfied, feverish faces tell you that. I don't suppose that one in six will ever want a baby, or is fit to have one either, if she did.'

'It all seems wrong . . .' said Oliver, after a little silence.

There came a lull in the dancing; inveterate dancers as most of the guests were, the pianola won in the end. Hutton produced wine for his thirsty guests, a light, sparkling, German wine which was like laughter itself in the tumbler . . . and most of them drank out of tumblers.

Dulcie came again to the chesterfield where Trollope and Oliver were sitting, and the old artist made room for her between Oliver and himself. She sank into the softly receptive seat with a little sigh.

'I believe you are tired, Dulcie,' Trollope said.

'I always get tired about midnight,' she replied. 'I wake up again about one, though. Oh, I say, Thorald's going to sing.'

Thorald was a Yorkshireman who seemed too big and too natural and too healthy for these Chelsea rags, but who was always the very soul of any at which he was present. He accompanied himself on the little Bechstein, which was nearer the fire than the pianola, and which seemed a more intimate and personal instrument; he sang a tuneful song which was popular at the time, about returning to Alabam in cotton-blossom time. Every one—even Trollope—joined in the chorus, the object apparently being to make as much noise as possible.

Oliver attempted to visualise those very sophisticated young people returning to Alabama to gather cotton . . . and smiled.

'What's the joke, Mr Darnell?' He heard Dulcie's quiet undertones in his ear, and was suddenly again conscious that she had been watching him.

'I thought it a funny song . . . being sung here, I mean.'

She gathered his meaning with the quick, gleaning insight of an intelligent woman dealing with a man who has interested her, and he noticed a little wistful smile around her lips.

'Why is it,' she asked, 'that there is always something a little bitter in irony? Your smile *was* ironic, you know.'

'Bitter?' He repeated the word.

'Yes . . . the fact that the idea of these people, of me, if it comes to that, doing anything simple like going to the country made you smile, has rather a bitter taste. Do you know, Mr Darnell, that sometimes I simply long for a quiet, simple, dignified life, far away from all this . . . glitter.'

Oliver did not know it, but Dulcie was on a voyage of discovery into his personality. They were sufficiently remote from the piano to be able to talk, but they had

to speak in guarded undertones. It lent a touch of intimacy to their conversation.

'This is another and unsuspected side to your character,' he said. 'But if you wished, you could surely go to the country for a few weeks.'

She had not intended to be taken quite so literally.

'I'm not sure if I could *live* in the country,' she parried. 'But there are times when I shut myself up in my studio and won't see any one, times when I simply want to be alone. I'm sure you know the feeling.'

'I'm afraid I don't,' said Oliver.

'There are times,' she went on, undeterred, 'when the men I know pall most abominably, when they all seem alike . . . I so *loathe* people, or things, which seem alike.'

Oliver remained silent, embarrassed by the intimacy which had come into the girl's tone. Though he did not look at her, he felt that her eyes were still on his face.

'There is something unsatisfactory in this life . . . one feels the need of something deeper . . .' she went on.

'My respected grandfather,' Oliver commenced—but for the great seriousness of his face she would have thought him joking, so quaint his opening words sounded to her. He noticed her start and for a moment he hesitated before he went on. 'My respected grandfather says that one never gets more out of life than one puts into it.'

'How uncomfortable!' said Dulcie, with a tiny *moue*, and a shrug of her pretty shoulders. 'But what a queer way to speak of your grandfather.' She had ignored Luen-chi's remark.

'My grandfather is Chinese. In China we speak like that.'

'But how curious that you should retain such

mannerisms. You are as English as I am in appearance. Of course, when one talks to you one discovers differences . . . odd points of view, and little strangenesses which are quite fascinating.'

'Since I have been in London, I am coming to believe that deep down I am wholly Chinese, in spite of my appearance.'

A little silence came between them; she was thinking.

Of course, it would be as Darnell had said, she pondered. His physique would come from his father and his brain and soul from his mother. She had read that it was often so, that frequently great men had exceptional mothers whence came their greatness, that most men were influenced *mentally* by the mother and physically by the father. It was all so fascinating, he was so *different*, so simple, so un-English. An Oriental soul in an Englishman's body . . . the very thought gave her a little thrill.

Hutton came up.

'Will you sing, Dulcie?' he asked.

'Do you mind if I don't to-night, Ronald?' she asked. 'I don't feel a bit like it . . . and Mr Darnell is talking so interestingly.'

At the end of the evening Trollope walked as far as the King's Road with Oliver, whence a prowling taxi took him to his hotel. The two had arranged to meet the following morning and together they sought out the house-agent in the King's Road. He was a neat little man, excepting for a red waistcoat, and was affably polite. He had the *very* thing. He would come along with them. No trouble at all, two or three minutes away only. He did a considerable business with the painters; if he might say so, he was well known among them. Not so easy to please by any means, particular people were painters. Studio had only been vacant

a fortnight. Not his taste, of course, but the late occupier had furnished it with great care. Everything there, except plate . . . all the pictures had been stored, but no doubt Mr Darnell had his own pictures. *Here* they were. He shot out words as a machine-gun does bullets.

They followed him along a passage not unlike the one which led to Trollope's studio, and he opened a door on the right at the end.

The studio, although not in accord with the little house-agent's taste, was furnished with imaginative dignity. There was a severity about the distempered walls and black oak which appealed to Oliver at once. The middle of the floor was covered with a big carpet of soft blue, and an enormous chesterfield upholstered in the same colour faced the fireplace, in the front of which a low oak fender, with a flat top, provided additional seats. One went up a flight of steps to the bedroom which jutted a little into the room; one of its windows—a casement one—opening into the studio itself. A bathroom completed the establishment, and unlike many of the bathrooms attached to Chelsea studios, it was excellently fitted.

'I like it,' said Oliver, as he looked around.

'Two and a half guineas weekly,' the agent said.
'Dirt cheap at the price. . . .'

'Too much,' said Trollope. 'Far too much.'

'It will do,' Oliver said. 'I like it. When can I come in?'

'It's ready now,' said the agent. 'You'll have to arrange about a charwoman, of course. Mrs Scott's a very good one, 7 Kokran Street. I know she'll be glad of more work.'

Oliver wrote a cheque for a month's rent and handed it to the agent.

'You'll be very comfy here,' the agent said, as he

took his departure. 'No interference from anybody. I've had the inventory took . . . usual conditions, of course. . . . Very glad to've met you.'

And thus, simply, Oliver became the occupier of No. 3 Garfield Studios, Chelsea.

'Yes, I like it,' said Trollope, when the red waistcoat had gone. 'Once you get the personal touch into it, it'll be splendid. Come on, I'm feeling like lunch.'

On their way back to King's Road they passed another block of studios.

'Dulcie's studio,' said Trollope, with a nod of the head. 'Already you have a neighbour.'

Trollope was very anxious to see some of Oliver's work, as Airlee's enthusiasm had made him curious, and a few days after the studio was taken, and Oliver, (with the help of the admirable Mrs Scott) had unpacked, the old painter called on him.

'You've already the personal touch,' Trollope said, as he looked around.

Without further words he passed to the examination of the pictures which were now on the walls. With Trollope it was a lengthy process, and Oliver watched him as he stood, with head on one side, looking intently at a canvas.

'I like that,' Trollope said, indicating a small picture. 'It reminds me of the scent from a jar of dead rose-leaves. . . .' He returned to the contemplation of the picture.

'To me,' said Trollope, when he came to the end of the pictures, 'the one thing which appeals more than another in your work, is its newness, its refreshing newness. You're up against the trend of things in London, Darnell. The modern movements are all in the direction contrary to that of your work. These modern young men loom large . . . and are apt to

be taken at their own valuation. The quiet, unruffled beauty which you came to know in Toyama, and which is in your work, challenges these eccentric people whose work is—even in my Occidental eyes—ugly.'

'You are very good,' said Oliver. 'I have heard of these Cubists, and the others.'

'You'll hear *them* quite soon enough,' replied Trollope. 'I had thought that Airlee had exaggerated when he wrote about your work. . . . It makes me feel very old, this quiet, effortless beauty you achieve. . . . When are you starting work here?'

'I'm a little unsettled at the moment,' Oliver replied.

'Moving in?' Trollope asked.

'No . . . not exactly. Meeting my relatives in Northboro'—my father's people, you know—seems to have disturbed me. And then London—it's so different. Women everywhere, I mean, smiling at one. It's hard to speak of it, but they seem to distract me from my work, to unsettle me. In China one can work apart from them, they are not so . . . so . . . positive.'

A little silence followed before Trollope replied.

'Of course, this is England, and in western lands, Darnell, our women have greater freedom than in your own. They have absolute freedom in this country as far as any one has such a thing in England. You'll have to bargain with that. I have been all over the world, and to a great extent I know what you mean . . . but I'm afraid you will not be able to veil the women here, even if they do unsettle you.'

'You are laughing at me,' said Oliver.

'Your view-point is curious, you know,' said Trollope, thoughtfully.

'That is why I like Mrs Scott,' Oliver went on. 'She moves about quietly; I hardly know she is here. She is not so emphatically a woman; one is not aware of

her. It is not good, Mr Trollope, that one should be aware of women. They do not help a man. . . .

'You won't be popular with the ladies, Darnell, if you speak like that. The English race firmly believes that a good woman is God's noblest work; that she inspires a man, lifts him. I must give you a copy of Mrs Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poems.'

'Again I am afraid you are laughing.'

'Oh, you evidently know the lady's work!'

'No, I don't!'

'Well, I'll be serious. I think this fear of women—there's no other word for it, Darnell—is quite wrong. I'm afraid that Luen-chi has given you ideas about them which are at wide variance with our European ideas. I believe the great truth about women is that they are not so very different from ourselves after all. You—like most people influenced by Oriental thought—regard them as something fundamentally different from yourself. There are religions which deny the existence of a woman's soul, for example. In *your* view—in the logical conclusion of that view at least—women have no soul, and very little intelligence. They are necessary for the continuance of the race, but have no part in the serious things of life, and when you find them free and equal with you, you are . . . unsettled. It's too late, Darnell, to relegate women to any particular sphere nowadays—she's broken her bonds, and I'm glad of it. In the past, man has *lived*, woman has existed. She's living, too, to-day, and coming from the ancient East, it startles you a little. But already even your own women are stirring in their sleep?'

'You think that women are our equals?'

'Not necessarily,' said Trollope. 'They are *different*, thank God!—but not inferior.'

'You think those women who were at Hutton's studio,

flaunting their bodies, are my equals. . . . I, who am a man and an artist!' Almost a passionate tone had suddenly tinged Oliver's voice.

'They are not average women, and you are not an average man. . . . They are hardly women at all in some respects. But in England you will find they go where they like, and do what they like, and, incidentally, that it is very hard to ignore them. If you told any one of them that she "*unsettled you*," she would probably accuse you of flattery. They're *out* to unsettle you, and I'm not certain that it isn't good for you.'

'Now, I'm afraid you are laughing again.'

'I'm not, really,' said Trollope. 'I think I understand your point of view, though, and that's very nearly the same thing, I'm afraid.'

'It isn't so much a point of view as instinct,' said Oliver. 'I *feel* that these things are wrong. This country seems to exist for women . . . it is not so in China.'

'You will find other differences, too,' said Trollope musingly. 'But again I see what you mean. Women, in China, exist for the State; here you think the State exists for women.'

'Yes,' Oliver agreed.

'Even if what you say is true, I think it is a good thing. After all, the State *does* exist for the individual's protection and benefit. Excessive patriotism always seems to me to be a confusion of means with end.'

'But women interfere with a man's *work*,' Oliver persisted.

'*Women* don't,' the old painter said. 'One woman may, though.'

And to this statement Oliver made no reply. He was wondering if it were true.

CHAPTER VIII

TOWLE ALIAS TREVENNING

THE morning after his talk with Trollope, Oliver was alone in his studio. He had been standing for some time in front of a half-finished canvas on his easel, and was puzzled at the great difficulty he had in continuing his work. As he stood idly fingering his brushes Trollope's words came back to his mind, '*Women don't . . . one woman may.*'

And in his heart he knew the old painter had spoken with truth. Dulcie—all the women he had met, and all London's infinite suggestion of women—had not essentially affected him or his work; behind his mind was one woman, even as Trollope had said, and it was Margaret Halliday. He knew that the disgust, resentment—he sought vainly for the explanatory word—which the others had called up in him, was a merely temporary irritant; the memories of the face he had painted in Northboro' were curiously persistent and disturbing. Aspects of her recurred to him; stray phrases she had used came back into his waiting brain with new and deepened meaning. He remembered a queer look which he had surprised once or twice in her eyes, a look which had puzzled him at the time, and which worried him more each time he thought of it. In the end, he put his brushes away, lit a cigarette, and consciously abandoned himself to his thoughts. Later he went to Soho—the kaleidoscope from the top of a bus was almost the greatest of the simple joys he found in London—and lunched in a tiny restaurant of which Trollope had told him. In the afternoon he

wandered idly about Soho, and sat awhile in the marbled hall of one of the great middle-class eating-houses which are perhaps the most symptomatic things of the modern London. From his table in a corner he watched the crowd around him with unflagging interest. Afterwards he discovered the bookshops in the Charing Cross Road, and whilst he was standing outside the little red one there, he heard a voice greet him,—

‘Surely . . . Darnell, unless my eyes deceive me !’

He turned to find a man at his side whose face he recognised, but whose name, even if he had ever known it, had escaped him.

‘My eyes have not deceived me,’ the other went on. He was a tall, gaunt man of perhaps thirty-five, his chin was very blue from lack of any recent shave, his eyes were big and wild.

‘Sankey, my name is. I see you don’t remember me,’ he continued. ‘We met at Hutton’s studio.’

‘Of course,’ Oliver murmured. ‘You must forgive me; your name had for a moment escaped me.’

‘It’s a rotten name, anyway,’ Sankey admitted cheerfully. ‘But what’s in a name? I was just going along to my club—a rotten club, but still, God help it, a club. Perhaps you will join me? It is a place where those who matter foregather. Artists and the like. It has one virtue for which I forgive it all its sins. One may purchase real beer there—beer actually containing malt and hops; the dietetic value of the one and the tonic properties of the other are equally soothing to me.’

‘It sounds very attractive, although I do not like beer,’ Oliver said.

‘Not like beer! My dear chap . . . but come along. I’m feeling most horribly lonely. I don’t often.’

‘I, too, am feeling lonely,’ Oliver said. ‘I shall be very pleased.’

'It is but ten minutes away,' Sankey said. 'It is of easy access and this, with its most excellent beer, make it desirable in mine eyes. . . .'

They walked along together.

'You are a painter, a new painter, I understand,' Sankey went on. 'I'm a poet.' He made the statement quite simply.

'I have not met a poet before . . . ' Oliver said.

'I am not a very good poet,' Sankey admitted. 'I improve when I am drunk, I understand. You do not get drunk, no?'

'No!' repeated Oliver.

'Quite right, too, excellent. One shouldn't. I do it merely in the interests of my muse. I am a dull fellow when I am sober. I am dull now. We turn to the right here. . . . The entrance to the club is not of the best. . . .'

For once Sankey was not exaggerating. The entrance was by a flight of dirty stone steps, leading down into apparently impenetrable blackness. He went ahead, turning back towards Oliver as he did so in order to continue talking. At the bottom of the steps was a green baize door which Sankey pushed open with his foot. Beyond the door was a passage in which brushes and pans were stored and which led to another door. At this door Sankey knocked. Whilst he waited, he turned to his guest.

'Amazingly dirty place, this,' he said cheerfully.

'Quaint!' said Oliver politely.

'You know, I hate that word,' Sankey said. 'It's used to cover up all kinds of horridness . . . there is no other word for it; this place is *dirty*. The passage smells horribly sometimes . . . it isn't sanitary. . . .'

The door opened and a woman of thirty or so, neatly dressed but with a smudge across her face, appeared.

'Oh, it's you, Mr Sankey,' she said. 'There's no one here yet.'

'Good!' he said. 'They will come soon enough. Welcome to the Esoteric Club, my dear Darnell . . . and mind the beam; it's a most confoundedly low doorway. This club will one day be famous as the haunt of Those who Really Mattered.'

He led the way into a room which was furnished with a piano and a great number of chairs and little tables. In the far corner he selected two of the more comfortable chairs, and when they were seated he borrowed a cigarette from Darnell and asked him what he would drink.

'Tea,' said Oliver.

'But you don't drink *tea*, surely?'

'I do,' said Oliver.

The poet sighed and ordered a pot of tea and a bottle of beer, which were forthcoming.

Sankey poured out his beer slowly and carefully, with solemn exactness.

'Let us drink and for a while forget,' he quoted. He drank . . . unmistakably.

'That's better,' he said. 'I have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the inspiration to romance until the gentle influence of alcohol urges me. When I'm morbidly sober—alas, too often my condition, so often indeed that to be sober is becoming normal with me—I see clearly that there is only one story in the world: there was a woman and a man who loved her; and equally clearly that that is usually a very dull story. When I have—as that cold and depressing person Ibsen has it—the vine leaves in my hair, stories seem to bubble up in my brain, as the little beads do in the golden liquor of my glass. I write short stories on occasion—happy stories, of the magazine type, for gain—did I tell you? My poems, alas for human ingratitude,

would not keep me in bread, much as I dislike the staff of life . . . most certainly not in beer.'

'How interesting! I have a cousin—a sort of cousin—who writes short stories.'

There was a knock at the door and the lady with the smudged face admitted a girl and two men. They greeted Sankey across the room, but settled down at a table of their own. Gradually others drifted in, and Oliver found the people around him so interesting that he listened without any great zest to Sankey, who still talked.

Most of the men present—they who, according to the poet and short-story writer, 'mattered'—were of the type which is always seen in the cheaper 'Bohemian' clubs and at the few *cafés* which exist in London where the prices are not excessive. A minority of them had attempted to be distinctive in their dress and had adopted most of the simple methods of their kind . . . braid down trousers of check, and flowing ties. In the main they seemed underfed and anaemic, but very jolly. The girls—one never, or very rarely, sees a woman at these places—had been more successful in their attempt to grasp whatever attention was within range. With one or two exceptions they were inexpensively dressed and wore jewellery of the beaten silver type, which has the double value of modest cost and effectiveness. They were physically much better specimens than the men and, on the whole, considerably prettier than those one would find in a suburban gathering. Here and there were strikingly beautiful girls . . . Chelsea models probably, or chorus girls. They sat about, the men talking incessantly and nearly every one smoking. Men and girls retained their hats, and the thing which struck Oliver most about them was their poor footgear, all the poorer for the sharp contrast with the silken stockings which were prominent, as such stockings usually are.

A girl at an adjoining table smiled at Sankey and as she did so Oliver caught the gleam of gold in her mouth.

'That girl seems proud of the gold in her dying teeth,' said Sankey quietly. 'It is an epitome of modern civilisation, that pride. Modern civilisation . . . pah ! I am a Socialist, a Communist, my dear Darnell. From each according to his means, to each according to his needs. A simple motto, but one which will one day govern the world.'

'You are a great many things,' said Oliver, and his speech was devoid of irony. 'The people here are very interesting. . . .

'You think so? I'm glad . . .' He drained his tankard and more beer was forthcoming.

'Yes. They are interesting, poor devils,' he mused. 'And in spite of everything I prefer them to the mass of people in whom individuality has been crushed. The girls here may not be up to the standard of . . . say, Surbiton. I don't know the place, but it's somewhere in the suburbs and is, I understand, unpleasant. The people there look down on us as from a great height, but in their hearts they are not more moral than we . . . only more conventional, not more virtuous, only more cowardly . . . arrogant and mechanical.'

'I do not know Surbiton,' Oliver said.

'I congratulate you,' said the poet. 'Here we may be sinners but we *live* . . . in our own way at least. It is a very significant fact and one which very nearly reconciles me with religion, that nowhere in all the gospels does the Christ frown upon a sinner. Not once !'

'So?' Oliver said.

'Yes,' the other assured him. 'I personally am a revolutionary, you know. The existing conditions are

intolerable. Even the great, formal, instinctive things are dwarfed and throttled by the grim, inexorable crushing-down which is Modern Civilisation. A man loves a girl . . . he may be a poet, a genius, but a man with the soul of a gorilla will win her if he has money. I do not blame the girl, mind; what is wrong is the appalling power which money possesses.' He spoke with an intense and pathetic eagerness which lit up his dark eyes and animated his whole face. He meant what he said tremendously, and behind his vehemence it was obvious that something rankled which was personal to him.

'Of all things,' the revolutionary went on, 'love should be free; love, the great creative, inspiring force of the universe. In modern life love is shackled, enslaved.'

Again he drained his tankard.

'I have loved,' he said after a pause, during which he leaned across to Oliver. 'I still love . . . and in vain.'

Oliver was embarrassed by the other's emotion; it was the English strain of blood in him, for the expression of emotion of any kind makes an Englishman feel awkward. The other noticed it.

'I've no right to inflict my private affairs on you like this,' he said. 'No right at all, but it lends point to my argument. If I had money, she would marry me—she admits it. But I have no money and love lies bleeding . . . we have a flower in England called "love-lies-bleeding."

The irony was completely missed by Oliver who said, 'You should make money. It should not be hard for you.'

'It would mean selling myself to the enemy, selling my soul—writing what they want me to write, providing hog-wash for the swine. . . .'

'But all the artists who make money do not make . . . hog-wash,' Oliver pointed out.

Possibly Sankey had a reply, but it was never made, for at that moment a girl entered who absorbed his attention so completely that the conversation came to a sudden end. Oliver suspected the new-comer to be the girl of whom his companion had been speaking. Sankey beckoned to her and she came across to his table.

'Darnell, let me introduce you to Miss Viola Trevenning,' the poet said.

Oliver rose and bowed, and elaborately waited for the girl to be seated before he resumed his chair. His politeness roused a smile here and there among those who noticed it.

'Has Sankey bin layin' the lor down?' she asked affably as she sat down.

'Oh, no,' said Oliver. 'He has been very interesting.' He was a little surprised to hear her imperfect speech, for she was dressed quietly and well. She had fair hair and large eyes of chicory-flower blue. Her face was intelligent and piquant, and seemed as if it were always just on the point of smiling.

Sankey ordered tea for her, and she winked at Oliver as he did so.

'Come into a fortune?' she asked Sankey.

'I'm not a capitalist, Viola, as you know. I do not believe in fortunes.'

'You don't believe in anything,' she said. 'Down with everything wot's up, is his motto,' she added. 'I wish I knew a few capitalists . . . any'ow.'

'What have you been doing to-day?' Sankey asked.

'Sittin' for Wainwright . . . he'll never be a painter even if he gets as old as Methuselah.'

'I met Wainwright, I believe, at a party the other night,' said Oliver. 'A tall, dark man?'

'That's him . . . a nice chap; it's a pity he can't paint, he's so keen on it. Are you a painter, Mr Darnell?'

'Yes,' he replied, and for some reason or other a little silence followed his remark.

'Are you booked for dinner?' It was the Communist who broke the silence.

'No,' Oliver replied. 'Perhaps you will dine with me? I am very lonely to-day, and shall be most pleased.'

'So shall we,' said Sankey. 'At least, I think I can speak for Viola!'

'Rather,' the young lady said. 'I'd looked forward to grub with you, although that as often as not ends by my paying for both of us. Not that I mind, Sankey,' she added quickly.

'To each according to his needs, from each according to his means,' Sankey replied. He was quite unaffected by the girl's genial scorn.

'If that applied to beer,' the girl said, 'it would break down where you were concerned at once. Fancy giving you as much as you needed!'

It was a jolly little dinner in the same restaurant in which Oliver had lunched. Under the influence of the wine—'the one drink, my dear Darnell, in all the world, which is better than good beer'—Sankey waxed eloquent and slightly more optimistic, and left no doubt as to the girl being the hopeless romance of his life. Under the same influence Miss Trevenning's eyes sparkled and she became even more a pretty little guttersnipe than she had been in the club.

They parted outside the restaurant, and as far as Oliver was concerned there was an end of the adventure. He had spent an hour or so quite amusingly but had no desire ever to see the poet or the model again, after they had gone off into the night.

The disinclination to work, the peculiar mental condition in which it was a conscious effort to paint, was a strange experience for Oliver. The days went by without a return of the zest which had been part of his work in Japan. Trollope shared his distress, for he awaited eagerly the work Oliver would do in London.

'I don't seem able to get going . . . there's no interest in my work. Nothing I do pleases me,' Oliver complained to him.

'It's a passing mood,' Trollope assured him. 'The change in coming to London is very great and has diverted even the main stream of your life slightly. We all have known times when we found it impossible to work. Let's toddle round to Muirhead's studio. It's no use attempting to work if the spirit is not willing.'

Barry Muirhead, the painter's wife, was always delighted if Trollope went to see her, and both she and her husband were very interested in Oliver, whose reputation in Trollope's circle was based on the old painter's enthusiastic opinion. They had a tiny girl whose name was Joan, and Trollope's eyes lit up as she bounded into his arms. She called him 'Twoll,' and ruffled his white hair, and was not in the least affected by his international reputation. She was very shy of Oliver and made no overtures to him, which was very unlike Miss Joan's usual behaviour; even Barry's charm could not make up for the neglect. He was silent nearly all the time he was with the Muirheads, and when he left the old painter saw that the black mood was still upon him.

'Charming people, the Muirheads,' Trollope said. 'Joan is the most tyrannous young person I know. . . .'

'Mrs Muirhead reminded me very much of a girl I met in Northboro', a kind of cousin of mine. She has

the same ready enthusiasm. I found them both exhilarating. I like enthusiastic people.'

'You know, Darnell, a few days in Northboro' would probably dissipate the fit of the blues you seem to be suffering from.'

'I'd rather thought of going down the coming weekend. I will. I'll write to my grandmother to-night.'

'It isn't your grandmother who exhilarates you?' There was no trace of a smile on the old painter's face as he asked the question.

'Oh, no,' said Oliver. 'I told you it was a cousin of mine. . . .'

'Of course, some grandmothers can be very fascinating,' said Trollope blandly.

'Now you are laughing at me,' Oliver said. 'But I don't mind your laughing at me a bit. . . .'

'I must admit that I did permit myself a smile,' the other replied. 'You are really rather quaint, Darnell, you know. Look me up when you get back, there's a good chap. I'm very sorry I'm booked to-night or I would have made a strenuous effort to rid you of your mood.'

'You are very good,' said Oliver. 'I shall go for a long bus ride, and to bed early.'

'That at least has the virtue of simplicity,' commented Trollope, and it was possibly just as well that the younger painter did not notice the smile which again lit up Trollope's quiet old eyes.

The two men parted at the corner of Trollope's road, and after a momentary hesitation Oliver went on to his studio.

As he switched on the light there he caught a glimpse of himself in a big mirror opposite to him. He continued to look at himself. His mood was reflected in his face and, at the moment, he noticed grimly that the Oriental side of him was uppermost. His features appeared to

be sharper, his eyes narrower, the Occidental part of him to be incongruous. He wondered why this should be, why any mental disturbance should so affect his physical appearance and always in the same way.

His glance left the mirror and fell on the still unfinished picture. It shouted effort, effort, effort at him whose work was nearly always effortless. He took it from the easel and flung it to the far side of the room, where the excellent Mrs Scott found it the following morning and replaced it. The burst of petulance soothed him a little, and in a slightly chastened mood he wrote to his grandmother asking if he might come down to Northboro' the following week-end. He read the letter through carefully; the following morning they would discuss it at breakfast, Mrs Darnell, Philippa . . . and Margaret. Would Margaret want him to come again? There was Bobby Morden . . . Oliver thought of him for quite a long time until, indeed, his thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. He was glad; any one at the moment would have been welcome. He opened the door and in the dimness of the passage he saw Viola Trevanning.

'Good-evening, Mr Darnell . . .' she said. 'I hope I'm not intruding, but I've been working at Mr Wainwright's this afternoon, and I thought I'd drop in for a couple of minutes. If you're busy, I'll clear. I shan't mind it a bit if you are.'

'Not at all,' said Oliver. 'Come inside. I'm not busy and I'm quite alone.'

She did so and stood looking round his studio.

'Nice little place you've got 'ere,' she said. 'You're sure I'm not butting in?'

'Not at all,' repeated Oliver, who was obviously surprised by the whole affair, and who did not, for a moment, gather the meaning of her phrase.

'I'll sit down, then,' she said. As she did so she

took off her hat, a little tight-fitting one which needed no pins, and shook out her bobbed hair.

'Got a smoke, Mr Darnell?' she asked.

He passed her a box in silence and held a light for her.

'Wainwright gave me your address,' she said. 'I thought you might want a model sometimes. I'm supposed to be rather a good one.'

'I do not often use models,' Oliver said. 'But I shall be pleased if I need one of your type.'

'That's what I came for really,' she said. "'Tain't all beer and skittles bein' a model,' she went on. 'Still, we shuv along, you know. I say, what a ripping little bit of colour!' She rose and crossed to one of his pictures, one that he had painted at Toyama of the moon behind a tree, not unlike a silver birch. 'This yours?' she asked.

'I'm afraid so,' said Oliver.

'You needn't be afraid, me lad; it's great!' She spoke with the frank cheerfulness of her class. 'A model, if she's got any gray matter—as poor ole Wainwright calls it—gets to know a bit about pictures. You know, you could sell this.'

'I do not doubt,' said Oliver, who was finding his visitor very amusing.

She returned to her chair and Oliver noticed, as he had done at the club, that her boots were very poor, in spite of her silk-clad ankles. She smoked as if she enjoyed smoking, and was tremendously more at home than Oliver.

'Can I offer you anything?' he asked.

'What . . . coffee? I should like a cup of coffee. I'll make it for you if you like. I bin taught to make coffee properly. When I first came to Chelsea I used to call it "corfee," but it used to make poor ole Wainwright ill to hear me. It was 'im who taught me

how to make it as well as how to pronounce it, but for the life of me I can't see what it matters what you call a thing if your meaning's clear. Can you?'

'No!' said Oliver, without quite understanding her rapid talk. 'I shall be pleased if you will make coffee. It is here.' He led the way into the tiny kitchen and there he watched and admired the deft way she went about things.

'You've got a good char!' she said critically. 'The kitching's a darned sight better than any of the other painters.'

'A char?' Oliver asked.

'Yes, a woman, the woman who looks after the studio.'

'Oh, Mrs Scott. Yes, admirable.'

'Where's she keep the milk? Or don't you take milk with coffee? No? I do, though.'

'There's milk somewhere,' Oliver said. 'I know.'

She found it.

'I can make a nomlet,' she volunteered.

'I should like one,' said Oliver. 'If you like, we'll have a meal here. I'm really quite hungry, and it's amusing to watch you. You are amazingly domesticated. One hardly expects it in a model. . . .'

'Blessed is 'im who expecks nothing,' she mis-quoted. She gave Oliver the whites of the eggs to beat, and he entered into the preparation of the meal cheerfully. Viola discovered a tin of greengages and some cream cheese in his cupboard, and with these and the omelette she managed to produce quite a satisfactory meal.

'Yer know,' she said, as they sat together at the little gate-legged table. 'I wanted a meal pretty badly. Ole Wainwright ain't too well orf, and just along now, about all 'e can do is to pay his way. It's a shame. In some things I agree with Sankey. It ain't right that a decent chap like ole Wainwright should

be so 'ard up. Everybody about 'ere knows it, so I ain't betraying confidence.'

'I'm sorry,' said Oliver.

'Ole Sankey got quite squiffed the other night after you'd gorn,' she went on.

'Squiffed?' Oliver asked.

'Yes, blotto . . . you know what I mean? Boozed, drunk.'

'Oh, I see!' Oliver said.

'Yes. 'E's a rum un. A clever chap, with all his bunkum. Quite amusin' when 'e's properly squiffed. Quotes poetry by the yard. 'E's very fond of me. Wrote a lot of poetry about me. But he's no blinkin' *good* to a girl. After all, a chap ought ter 'ave a job of some sort. Poetry ain't much cop where the spon-dulicks are concerned. Why, often the poor devil ain't got the money for 'is nex' meal, and whenever 'e's like that, sure enough 'e'll talk as big as 'ouses. The other night if 'e 'adn't met you, I'd 'ave 'ad to stand him grub. He does it all so natchural that you can't get annoyed with 'im. He's just a big baby. I'll take these plates back into the kitching and then we'll 'ave some greengages.'

When she came back she resumed her inexhaustible chatter, and although Oliver missed the meaning of some of her sayings, he was quite amused. She was so cheerfully a little guttersnipe and nothing else, save for the accident of her beauty, so natural, so utterly without reserve.

'I'm feelin' a darn sight better after that little lot than I did before it,' she admitted, when the meal came to an end.

'So am I,' replied Oliver. 'I'm glad you came.'

'Well, let's draw up to the fire and be cosy,' she suggested. 'Where are those cigarettes . . . I see 'em.'

He watched her smoking. She was entirely self-possessed as if her presence there was quite in the usual order of things. She sat on the rug in front of the fire, and suddenly she rested her elbow on his knee. All he could see of her was the tip of her ear.

'I wonder,' she said, after a pause, 'what it feels like to be married . . . on the straight, I mean, *reely* married?'

'I cannot say,' said Oliver.

'Bit mixed, I s'pose, like most things. 'Owever, the only chaps ever likely to marry me are the chaps I used to know in Walworth, and I simply couldn't live with them. If a girl gets to know people like painters, who 'ave barths every day, it spoils 'er for the chaps in a place like Walworth.'

'A clean soul is more important than a clean body,' said Oliver . . . it was a phrase he had heard Airlee use, pretentious and almost meaningless.

'Not in a girl's eyes,' she retorted. 'Give me a chap wot barths every day and I'll risk 'is soul. Of course,' she went on, 'Sankey 'ud marry me. It's an awful pity he's loopy.'

'Loopy?' Oliver asked, suspecting some European disease hitherto unknown to him.

'Yes, barmy, orf 'is onion, up the pole.' She finished by tapping her forehead explanatorily. 'I suppose it comes of bein' a poet. It was 'im what gave me my name.'

'But isn't your name Viola Trevanning?'

'Good Lord, no!' she said. 'Maggie Towle's my name. I met 'im one night at the Elephant. We'd got about a bob between us, and we 'ad grub at a coffee stall. I was out of a job and he interjuiced me to ole Wainwright, who wanted a model. That was five years ago. And that's my 'istry, though God knows what's made me cough it up for you. I never been a

model for the nood; I don't 'old with it; that's 'ow lots of girls go wrong. Head if you like, I tells 'em, but not the nood. After all, one body's like another. No, I don't 'old with the nood.'

'But art is something quite apart from sex,' Oliver said. 'It is the beauty of a body which appeals to an artist, not the body.'

'I've 'eard that before. . . . 'Ere and there it may be true, but there's cases where it ain't. No, I don't 'old with it. That's wot makes it so 'ard for me to get work sometimes. . . .'

'I'll speak to Mr Trollope about you, if you wish,' Oliver offered.

'I know 'im all right. I sometimes work for 'im . . . and for Anthony Muirhead . . . everybody in Chelsea says Anthony's goin' to the top.'

'I met him a little time ago . . . and Mrs Muirhead.'

'Did you see the baby? . . .' An entirely new note came to the girl's voice in the eager question.

'Yes. . . .'

'Dear little mite, ain't she?' She relapsed into silence, and sat awhile gazing into the fire. Oliver was not interested in psychology, but he wondered idly what was passing in her mind. Had he known he would have been surprised.

'Well, I'd better be goin',' she said, and she rose as she spoke.

'I'm awfully sorry you cannot get enough work,' said Oliver. 'I will paint you one of these days. I would like to pay you now.'

'Not me!' she said. 'You probably mean all right, but a girl's got to be jolly careful, I can tell you. If I sit for you you can pay me then. Pore ole Wainwright couldn't pay me to-day . . . leastways if 'e 'ad, there'd 'ave been nothing left, and I kidded 'im I didn't mind

waiting, which is why I'm jolly glad you were in and stood me grub.'

'Well, come along next Wednesday,' said Oliver.
'Two-thirty, sharp.'

'Thanks,' she said briefly, and departed.

When Maggie Towle left his studio Oliver settled down with a book which Trollope had lent him. It was a novel about Chelsea and the men who paint in it, a very modern novel indeed, and one which had caused a considerable stirring in the studios when it had appeared. He read steadily for an hour or so, and found that the touches of what is called realism which were skilfully interspersed in the book outraged his every instinct. The models were voluptuous creatures of an incredible coarseness, utterly unlike the girl who had been with him during the evening. The painters were, in their different way, even more coarse, and the life the book presented was an orgy; whether it was true or not Oliver had no means of knowing, but it was a life wholly repulsive to him, a life in which the men and women apparently lacked everything which in his conception made for decency and permanence. Trollope had asked him to read the book—'I don't like the man who wrote it, and I don't like the book,' Trollope had said. 'But it will open your eyes, I think, and probably save you many quite useless shocks'—and Oliver made an effort to finish it, but in the end he flung it away from him as he had flung the post cards a creature of the darkness had thrust into his hand one evening in the King's Road.

He went out, and without a definite objective he found himself in the moonlight of the Embankment. He sat on one of the seats and watched the lights opposite, and the moving beauty of the dark water. He was depressed to an intolerable degree. In that moment he loathed his father's country, loathed the

life in which he had flung himself with such tremendous zest and hope, loathed the grim, juggernaut inevitability of it all. His emotions were evident in his face, for he had little of Luen-chi's mastery of expression, had never cultivated his grandfather's instinctive passivity of feature. Old Luen-chi's face was incapable of betraying his emotions, but in the London moonlight his grandson's face showed clearly the turmoil of thought and apprehension which was passing in his mind.

Two girls passed him as he sat looking moodily out across the water. One of them looked at him intently for a moment as she passed, and her remark to the other came back to him on the still night air: 'A Chink!' she said.

The words startled him, although he knew of old that in moments of intense feeling the Chinese side of him was always uppermost.

As soon as the girls had passed out of sight he rose and made his way back to his studio. On his desk he noticed the still unposted letter to his grandmother, and thoughts of Margaret came crowding soothingly and exclusively into his mind.

He went out and posted the letter.

Trollope laughed when Oliver told him the following morning of his adventure with Maggie Towle.

'I know her,' he said. 'A puritan model. A cheerful little thing, but morbidly "good." Had it struck you, Darnell, that there is very much in common between the puritanism of her narrow, little, undeveloped mind and the whole attitude you adopt towards women . . . that quaint, detached austerity in you which makes you irritable when ladies wear evening dress, for instance.'

'It had not,' replied Oliver.

'No, I don't suppose it would. But it is so, none the less, and I rather think the phrase, "I'm a good girl," will last with her rather longer than this . . . calm detachment . . . in you.'

'I'm never quite certain whether you're laughing at me,' Oliver complained.

'Ah, well, my dear Darnell, most of us are amusing to other people, but I'm quite serious. I usually am when you think I'm pulling your leg.'

CHAPTER IX

OLIVER PROPOSES

THE two days which passed before his grandmother's reply came to him were among the most miserable in Oliver's life. He wandered about London and found a loneliness in it which he had never experienced in any other city. Although Oliver did not know it until afterwards, Trollope had called at his studio three times during those two days.

Never had letter been more welcome than the one which Mrs Scott brought in with his tea. It was a letter in many ways characteristic of the old lady who had written it. She reminded him that she had already invited him to come to Northboro' whenever he wished, and that the room which had been his father's was always ready for him.

Oliver decided to go at once.

He had done little work since he had settled in the studio, and that little was bad, since it had been a conscious effort to do it; the magic feeling of distance and light and colour, that deft touch of the master which had raised Airlee's enthusiasm in the early days had deserted Darnell in London. He lacked the keen insight which is called inspiration and that compelling interest in his work which is essential to the artist. The one thing he had done in England at all comparable with his work in Toyama was the crayon sketch he had made of Margaret, and the knowledge that in all probability he would see her again within a few hours immediately lightened the fit of depression which had sat heavily on him for days past.

At St Pancras he obtained a corner seat and settled down. The world was brighter; distinctly brighter.

As the train was starting a man rushed up and scrambled breathlessly into his compartment. He dropped his bag on the floor and sat in the seat opposite to Darnell.

It was Bobby Morden.

'Hallo!' he said curtly, as he recognised Oliver.

After a momentary hesitation they shook hands.

'Going to Northboro?' Morden asked.

Oliver nodded.

'I do not like London,' he said. 'It is too big, I think.'

'You like Northboro?' . . .'

'No . . . hardly that. It is refreshing to meet one's relatives. Every one in London is a stranger—even Trollope.'

Morden was not sufficiently curious about the old painter to ask who he was.

'Are you thinking of staying in Northboro' for long?' he asked, rather too casually.

'I don't know,' said Oliver. 'I have done no work since I came to London. . . .'

'Um!' said Morden. 'I suppose you find our ways rather strange?' This politely, an attempt at general conversation.

'Some. . . . Oh, yes, others are common to all human beings, I think.'

They relapsed into silence. Oliver was conscious of a constraint in the other which was almost openly hostile.

Morden, after a while, opened a paper he had with him. Occasionally he commented on some item in the news and a sporadic conversation was thus kept up.

'I see there's another outbreak on the Indian frontier,' Morden said after a considerable interval. 'Those

damned niggers are always creating trouble . . . ought to be wiped out.'

'They're hardly niggers,' Oliver pointed out.

'They're not whites . . . the white man is the ruler. . . .'

'That is so, at the moment,' admitted Oliver, who was still uncertain whether Morden had been pointedly rude or not.

At Northboro' they found Margaret awaiting them.

'Fancy you boys meeting in London!' she exclaimed. 'Aunt Philippa couldn't come to meet you, Oliver, so grandmother sent me . . . we'll give you a lift as far as the church, Bobby, if you like.'

'Thanks, no!' Morden replied. 'I'd better get a cab right through. See you this evening, Maggie, I suppose?'

'Right-o . . . I'm almost certain to be there,' she said, and with a casual farewell to Darnell, Morden turned away.

'It's very nice of you to come to see us again, Oliver,' Margaret said when they were alone. 'Grandmother is very pleased about it.'

'She is very good,' Oliver said.

On the way to King's Oaks he watched Margaret curiously. She seemed new to him, strange; it was as if she were a different girl altogether from the one he had met before. She was wearing a coat and skirt of a soft blue cloth, and her face was faintly flushed with colour.

'And how are the short stories getting on?' he asked. 'I have looked in the magazines for them. . . .'

'I've not been doing very well,' she said. 'It's such jolly hard work, too. I'm sure you don't have to work as hard as I do. That wonderful little sketch you made of me seemed hardly to cost you an effort. But I believe that I am coming to London for a while.'

Those girls at Richmond I told you of . . . they've asked me again, and I believe Phillipa's wavering.'

'That will be nice. We must meet when you do. I will show you my studio. Chelsea may provide what you call "copy."

'I should love it. I've always wanted to see real artists and interesting people like models and writers. Here in Northboro' the people may be, and no doubt are, extremely worthy folk, but not even their least prejudiced critic can call them interesting. *Isn't* it a horrid place?' She waved her hand in a gesture which included the passing town.

'I find it interesting,' he said. 'Particularly King's Oaks. I've done no work to speak of since I returned to London,' he added. 'I don't seem able to work at all there.'

'Oh!' Her surprise was obvious in the exclamation. 'But why, Oliver? You went back with such wonderfully good resolutions.'

'I don't know. I don't seem able to settle down. . . .'

'You should go to Cornwall. . . . I know that's where painters *do* go.'

'Yes. Trollope said that it had ceased to be a county and become a bad art school,' replied Oliver. 'Trollope is cynical, though.'

'You aren't,' she said. 'You're the least cynical man I've ever met. You don't even pretend to be cynical, like Bobby does. Somehow, nearly all the men I know are absolute sentimentalists at bottom, and yet pretend to be terribly cynical. You always seem so awfully in earnest. I think it is a great compliment. . . .'

'You, I'm afraid, are being cynical now . . .' Oliver said.

'I think *many* women are, although they pretend to be sentimental. I haven't a ha'porth of sentimentality

in me. The women in this place are simply too terrible. They gush, pour themselves out. Sometimes it's a man —the new curate at St Jude's is the vogue at the moment in our set—sometimes it's babies, sometimes it's an actor, but always they have something or somebody to gush over. I believe they'd lie down and die if they couldn't gush . . . ah ! here we are !'

The carriage turned in at the gate of King's Oaks with the usual series of jerks and groans, and once again Oliver found his grandmother waiting for him at the top of the steps. She took his hand in her two hands and looked long and searchingly at him before she kissed him.

'You're like your dear father, Oliver,' she said, and he saw that in the storehouse of her brain old memories and old pains were stirring.

As he knew already, King's Oaks was a house of habit which had crystallised into ritual. Eliza appeared; she must have been awaiting his advent. She led him to his room with the same gestures and with almost the same words that she had used on his previous visit. Nothing had altered; there was something in the very atmosphere which precluded newness, prevented change. From his window he looked out on the same Northboro', the same factories with the same ordered rows of myriad windows.

Below he found his grandmother and Aunt Philippa awaiting him in the dining-room.

'How are you, Oliver?' his aunt asked incuriously.

He told her after they had shaken hands.

'I was engaged on church work,' she explained, 'or I would have met you at the station.'

In Northboro', apparently, the main function of the church was to absorb a mass of superfluous feminine energy; probably a certain amount of good resulted.

'I'm glad you did not incommoded yourself, Aunt

'Philippa,' he said. 'I should have been very distressed had you done so. Margaret was kind enough to meet me.'

'Oh, yes. I asked her to,' his aunt explained quickly.

Margaret entered. She had changed her coat and skirt for a little black evening frock with an embroidery of white wool round the neck and sleeves. Her cheeks still possessed their faint flush, and she greeted Oliver with a little smile as she entered.

Followed the evening meal, a most ritualistic proceeding in King's Oaks, punctuated by the same remarks and polite queries from the grandmother and aunt as Oliver's previous evening meals there had been.

Oliver talked of his life in Chelsea, of Trollope, and Muirhead and Hutton, of the dances and pianolas, of the embankment in the moonlight, and, discreetly (for a certain wisdom comes to a man with love), of his opinions. Margaret led him on with many eager questions. She was interested deeply in the women he had met, the models (Aunt Philippa stiffened visibly at the introduction of such an unpleasant topic of conversation), the girl artists with studios of their own and Careers (the word, as Margaret pronounced it, always had the *majuscule*), and with everything which she imagined went to make up that vague and monstrous entity which, in her thoughts, she called Life (also with the *majuscule*). At the end of the meal he received the same gracious invitation from his grandmother to smoke before he joined them in the drawing-room. Alone in the dining-room, the very cigarette seemed to have taken to itself something of the ritual of the house.

When he joined the ladies he found that Margaret was not there and his aunt informed him that she was at a neighbour's house, where certain amateur

theatricals were in the process of rehearsal. He discovered afterwards that Margaret had not intended to go, but Philippa had urged her not to miss the rehearsal.

For a while he and his grandmother talked of his father and of Sansi; Philippa maintained an eloquent silence, save for the clicking of her incessant knitting needles.

Margaret came in about half-past nine. She was in good spirits and her eyes were bright with laughter.

'You ought to have seen the hero making love,' she said. 'He was deliciously awkward. If only it had been "As You Like It," the heroine might have said truly, "I had as lief be wooed of a snail"; she seemed most horribly bored with it all, poor girl. He held her as if he were frightened she would bite him . . . every one was amused.'

'But is it necessary at rehearsals . . . that he should hold her?' Aunt Philippa asked.

'Rather! . . . if he holds the heroine when the play is done in public as he did to-night, the audience will have hysterics.'

'I don't know that I approve of these . . . amateur theatricals,' Aunt Philippa said.

'You dear old thing.' Margaret crossed to Philippa and kissed her. 'You disapprove of everything which is even mildly amusing, and goodness knows there is little enough in this town.'

'If you sought more to improve yourself than merely to be amused, I think it would be much better,' Philippa said firmly.

'But you know how I hate things which improve me,' Margaret laughed. 'Tell me why it is, Aunt Philippa, that things which are good for one are always so dull; porridge, long sermons, rhubarb, woollen . . . er . . . clothes, and so on.'

'Margaret! You are really incorrigible!' But the spinster laughed, as she always did in the end if her adopted daughter held out long enough.

'Is Mr Morden in the play?' Oliver asked.

'Rather . . . he's the hero. You really should see him. If only he cared a tiny little bit for the heroine I believe that he would get along much better, but he doesn't, I know.'

'It is rather a pity,' said Oliver thoughtfully.

The following afternoon Margaret and Oliver again walked to Tiley Mill, which is the place where every one goes who 'walks' in Northboro'.

It was a delightful day, and in the quiet lanes, Northboro', with its factories and its long, unlovely streets, might have been utterly remote instead of but three miles away. Margaret was wearing a blue frock . . . a beautifully cool and fresh little frock.

They had tea in the old farmhouse to which generations of Northboro's courting couples had made recurrent pilgrimages, and Oliver liked the first really old English house he had been in very much.

Again their talk—or rather his, for Margaret was content to question him—was of Chelsea and London. She seemed never to tire of hearing about the men and women whom he had met, and of the wonderful world whence he had come.

'The more I hear of the great world, the more I loathe narrow, circumscribed Northboro',' she said, as they passed over the tiny stream below the mill and back towards the town.

'But Northboro' is part of the world,' he said. 'In other places one would talk of Northboro'.'

'It is more than a part of the world . . . in the estimation of its people. It's the pivot of the universe. Everything is judged by the Northboro' standard.'

'I often thought of it whilst I was in London,' he said.

'Surely not !'

'I did. I found Chelsea just as depressing as you find this town. I simply longed to get back here.'

She was suddenly conscious of that faint, indefinable suggestion of physical repugnance which he had called up in her before.

'I suppose I'm jolly ungrateful to grumble,' she went on. 'After all, Aunt Philippa is most awfully kind to me and I ought to be slapped. Ah ! Here are the trams !'

He noticed the change which had come into her tone and wondered.

They talked very little on the way back to King's Oaks. Oliver thought it was part of the general depression of which she had been speaking. But she was thinking, and a woman rarely thinks and talks at the same time. She was comparing Oliver and Bobby Morden. The one came from the great unknown world outside; a figure of fascination, of genius perhaps, a man who had achieved without apparent effort all that she had toiled for unavailingly. With him she might go to the old, strange countries of the world, to India, to the remoter, more wonderful lands beyond; she would see the world, live ! The other, in the latter days, had come to be identified with Northboro'. With him Northboro' would still dominate, still circumscribe her life. In him was no fascination, no subtle attraction.

She glanced sharply at Oliver. But was he subtle? He seemed so innocent, so obvious when he talked, for all his cleverness and experience. Subtle was hardly the word. Unknowable . . . that was more the word. One could understand Bobby; he did and said what one expected of him, he was *dependable*, knowable. And yet she knew that a walk to Tiley Mill with Bobby

would have lacked all the savour of the walk she had just had, all its excitement and interest.

She fell to thinking of that suspicion of physical repugnance. Was it fear? Clearly she had no fear of Bobby and she was certain she need have none of Oliver, but it was certainly very like that emotion. It was as if something deep down in her had warned her suddenly. But against what?

'I'm afraid you've a touch of the "blues,"' he said, after a considerable interval.

'I'm afraid I have,' she said, with an odd little laugh, and again they walked in silence until they were near King's Oaks.

However unsatisfactory the walk had proved (and Oliver was conscious that the latter part of it had been very unsatisfactory) it had one result which, as far as he was concerned, was good. He had made up his mind that the one thing in all the world which he wanted desperately, the one thing which was essential if he were to achieve success in his art, if indeed he were to express himself at all, was to make Margaret Halliday his wife.

Under these conditions there was only one course open to a Chinese gentleman, and that course, quite naturally and inevitably, Oliver took.

He had some little difficulty in getting his Aunt Philippa alone. He attempted several times that evening to do so, but without avail. Always it seemed that Margaret or his grandmother was with her. He achieved his purpose, however, the following afternoon. She was in the garden, in a low chair, knitting. She was always knitting; some women are.

'May I sit with you, Aunt Philippa?' he asked.

'Certainly, Oliver. It is nice of you to want to,' she said. 'You'll find another chair in the summer house. . . .'

'I think I prefer the grass.'

Now that he had her alone he was not certain how to commence.

'Things are very different here, Aunt Philippa,' he said.

'I suppose they are, Oliver,' she replied, and save for the click, click, click of her knitting needles, silence came to them.

'I seem more certain of myself in China,' he said, after a pause.

'You'll soon fall into our ways. I should have thought your father would have told you about us, but there, he's been away so long now that I expect he's forgotten.'

'In China, if a gentleman wishes to marry a certain lady he approaches, in the first place, her parent or guardian.'

'That is supposed to be the etiquette, even yet, in England,' his aunt replied. 'I'm afraid the modern young man does not do it, however.'

'So?'

She glanced up sharply at the long-drawn vowel sound, and she saw in a flash that he was thinking of Margaret. The blood drained from her face, leaving it with even a deeper pallor than it normally had.

'I . . . I don't understand,' she faltered.

'I wish . . . to . . . to ask your permission to ask Margaret . . .'

'Have you asked Margaret?' she interrupted.

'But, no!' he replied.

'You don't know, but there is . . . an understanding between her and Mr Morden. You may unsettle her. . . .' She spoke with agitation, almost with distress.

'I'm afraid you don't like me, Aunt Philippa.'

'It isn't that. . . . I don't understand you. You

are so . . . different from us.' Her knitting dropped to the ground at her feet. Oliver picked it up and returned it to her.

'After all, I am your nephew, . . .' he pointed out.

'Yes, I know, Oliver. I'm sorry, but I don't want Margaret to marry you.' Her voice was grave with fear.

'Will you tell me why, Aunt Philippa?'

'I can't . . . it all seems wrong to me. The part of you which isn't English seems to cut you off from us. I don't think that either you or Margaret could be happy. . . .'

'But in spite of it I may be a good man,' he protested.

'Of course, Oliver,' she said hurriedly. 'I can't help it; it is instinctive. . . . Really, I *can't* help it.'

'A Chinese parent could say exactly the same thing to me, and with the same reason, if I wanted to marry his daughter. I don't seem to have a chance anywhere.'

'I'm very sorry,' she repeated. 'If only things had been different, nothing would have pleased me better . . . but as it is. . . .' Her words trickled out to nothingness.

'Then you refuse to allow me to ask Margaret?'

'I can't stop you, Oliver. Perhaps it would be better if you did. . . . It is a terrible responsibility to refuse you.'

'Then I will ask her, Aunt Philippa,' he said, rising. 'It is good of you to have been so patient with me.' As he was speaking he saw that she was crying, and with a feeling of savage resentment—he was not certain against what, certainly not his aunt—he turned away.

Moody and depressed he wandered through Northboro' streets alone. The stray phrase he had caught from a passing girl on the Embankment came back to him: 'Chink!' He knew—none better—that behind the phrase had been an amused kind of contempt. And

in China, passing strangers had commented audibly on his English appearance, with equal dislike. He imagined himself an outcast, so bitter were his memories and so small his hope. There were Luen-chi's tears, and Sansi's, and now Aunt Philippa's.

At the foot of the hill he saw Margaret coming towards him.

Bobby Morden was with her.

Oliver noticed the frown which crossed Morden's face as he caught sight of him, and from Margaret's manner—affable and nervous—he suspected that she and Morden were talking of him as he came up. But his mind was made up and he turned back with them. Morden left them at the gate of King's Oaks, and Oliver and Margaret entered the garden together.

'Margaret . . . will you come as far as the end of the garden? I want to talk to you.'

'Of course,' she said.

They came to where Oliver had sat with his aunt, and he paused at the chair which still remained there.

'Will you sit down, Margaret?' he asked.

'Whatever's wrong?' she asked, with a smile. 'You are like a ritualistic priest . . . still, I will sit down, although I don't particularly want to.'

Oliver remained standing.

'I was talking to Aunt Philippa this afternoon,' he commenced.

'Yes?'

'I asked her if I might ask you to marry me, Margaret.'

'Good Heavens!' She rose and faced him.

'What did she say?' she demanded.

'She refused to say anything. She refused to give me permission or deny it, so I ask you now, Margaret; will you marry me?' His features were utterly impassive whilst he was speaking, and he spoke without

animation. At the moment, he was utterly remote from the girl who faced him; never had she been so conscious of the unfamiliar, alien side of him, never so acutely aware of the repulsion he aroused in her subconscious mind, now that she definitely had to think of him as a suitor.

'I was afraid you would ask me this,' she said, and then abruptly sat down again.

'You don't answer my question,' he said gently.

'I don't want to marry any one . . . now,' she said.
'I may never want to.'

'Ah, Margaret, if you knew how I want you, how I longed for you in London! I could not work there because I wanted you so!' Passion broke through his impassivity and showed itself in his voice. She flinched from him; he noticed, and again the hopeless look came back to his eyes.

'I'm sorry, Oliver,' she said miserably. 'Perhaps . . . I don't know,' she spoke desperately, with a tumultuous desire to lessen his pain, for apart from her instinctive fear of him, she liked him far too much to hurt him without hurting herself more.

'You may . . . one day?' he begged, and again she turned from the love in his dark brown eyes.

'I don't know,' she said again. 'Oliver, I hate to hurt you. You will believe that, won't you?'

'You do not love me?' he asked.

'I don't think I love any one,' she said.

'Is it because . . . of my mother?' he asked.

'No, . . .' she said. 'No,' but she knew that it was, and that it was pity for him which made her lie, pity which is the opposite of love.

'I would take you to China . . . you would love Sansi!' he urged. 'I would take you to Japan, to Toyama, where all is beautiful.'

She was looking out beyond him now, out between the

trees where peeped the factory chimneys in unlovely array.

'I will take you to Luen-chi's garden . . . to the Lotus Islands. We will find love there . . . and colour. Come with me, Margaret . . . I want you so !'

'I can't Oliver, now, anyway,' she said. 'If you still want me in a year, you can ask me again. . . .'

'You will wait?' he urged eagerly.

'Yes . . . unless I let you know. But only if you get on with your work, Oliver. It is hateful to think I have stopped that, hateful.'

'I will try,' he said. 'But I want you so !'

'You will promise me. You will work and not be silly?' she insisted.

'I will try,' he said, with a return of that impenetrable passivity which frightened her. 'If only you were there, I would paint great pictures, yes, *great* pictures.'

'You *will* paint great pictures, anyway, Oliver,' she said. 'You are an artist !'

'I wonder!' he said. 'My art doesn't weigh in the balance against you.'

'Not just at this moment, perhaps,' she said, and as she was speaking she rose.

'We are still good friends?' she asked, her eyes on his and anxiety in her voice.

'Margaret! But yes! Always I am your friend!'

'Then you will never speak about my upsetting your work again. If you *are* my friend, you will not let it happen either!'

'You are right!' he said. 'But what shall I say to Aunt Philippa?'

'Nothing!' commanded Margaret. 'You can leave it to me.'

And together they returned to the drawing-room where Mrs Darnell and tea were awaiting them.

The following morning Oliver returned to London, a London in which he had promised he would work. He gripped himself; he had given his word.

Trollope found him in the afternoon.

'Ha! I told you that a visit to Northboro' would do you a world of good,' the old painter said as he greeted Oliver. 'You're looking tons better *and this is the goods.*' He indicated the canvas on which he had found Oliver working.

'You think so?' Oliver asked, regarding his friend with the old, calm scrutiny.

'Assuredly!'

'Then my visit did me good?'

'I'm positive!' Trollope replied with that impregnable assurance which is found in elderly people even when they happen to be artists.

CHAPTER X

STRENUOUS YOUTH

AFTER his return from Northboro', and whilst he was striving desperately to be loyal to his promise to Margaret, Oliver frequently went to Ronald Hutton's studio. He found the people he met there were more interesting than likeable, none the less interesting even when he knew that all he saw of their lives was pose. He watched them calmly, and listened to them with a grave courtesy which might have been Luen-chi's, and which made him popular with people among whom listeners of any kind were rare.

A sultry evening in early June found him there. Outside, daylight still lingered, but the studio curtains were drawn and the lights were on; to a normal man this is one of the silliest habits of Bohemia. Dulcie Whittingham had flaunted her glorious hair and eyes at Oliver for a vain half-hour, and, cleverly sensing his mood, had relapsed into silence.

'London is no place for a civilised human to be in on such a night as this,' she said at last, in a quiet, restful undertone, which emphasised more than broke the silence.

'In Cornwall the evening is soft and grateful,' she went on. 'One could walk along warm, green lanes there, and the night would be "full of linnet's wings." Do you know Yeats?'

'I have a little book of his,' Oliver said. 'Trollope gave it to me.'

'More than any of the moderns,' she went on, with clever wistfulness, convinced that she had his sympathy,

'He awakes in one the desire for the simple things, simple colours, and beauty and quiet.'

'His poems are very beautiful,' Oliver agreed, wondering vaguely at the strange mood which had come to her.

'I cannot read him and be happy in this tumultuous rush which is life . . . our life.'

'No?'

She was undaunted, as women always are when they are confident that ultimately they will win.

'I usually spend August and September in Cornwall,' she continued. 'I know that cynical old gentleman, Trollope, scoffs at Cornwall, but even he must admit its charm. Besides, one can leave the beaten track.'

Oliver nodded.

'I simply hate beaten tracks, Mr Darnell . . . anywhere. There is no possibility of adventure in them. One might just as well be inanimate if there is no chance of adventure happening along.'

'I sometimes think that happiness only comes through work,' he replied.

'Ultimately . . . of course,' she said, after an interval in which her eyes had rested on his impassive profile, and as if she had been pondering his words, 'But one's environment—don't you think?—has a great deal to do with it?'

To this Oliver had no reply. Dulcie's appeal to him that night was not very strong. He was conscious of a tendency to yawn, and, as he knew, to yawn when a pretty woman is talking to one is the unpardonable sin. It is one of the few things which are not 'done,' even among intellectuals.

'Ah, here's Ronny!' she said brightly, as if she were delighted at the interruption.

Hutton came up to them. He wore a dinner jacket and—as a compromise with convention—a soft shirt.

For all that has been said against it, the costume is not unbecoming in a man.

'Hallo, Dulcie!' he said, 'and you, Darnell,' he added.

'Ain't it 'ot?' he said laughingly, as he sat down.

'Orrid!' said Dulcie. 'Mr Darnell and I were just talking of the delicious June nights in Cornwall. Why *are* we all here to-night when within a few hours' journey there is quiet and comfort. What sheep we are!'

'I can't get away for a week or so,' Hutton said. 'But when I can, off I go. However, there's a compromise to-morrow if you care to avail yourselves of it. You may find it interesting, Darnell, as a sample of English life as it flourishes in one of the more select suburbs. It is a tennis party at my home, the old people's place, I mean.'

'How thrilling!' laughed Dulcie. 'A tennis party!'

'They want *you* to go, old top,' Hutton said to his fiancée. 'My sister asked specially.'

'All right . . . I'll suffer!' she said, with another laugh. 'Won't you come too, Mr Darnell? You'll find it . . . interesting. My future relations-in-law typify the backbone of the British nation, and although a backbone is not the most exciting part of one's anatomy, I understand that all really good people have one.'

'Don't rot, Dulcie. Seriously, you may find it quite amusing, Darnell. You should get the two-fifteen from Waterloo.'

'I should like to,' Oliver said. 'But I do not play tennis, unfortunately.'

'So much the better. There are only two courts, and most people there will want to play. A man at a suburban tennis party who doesn't play tennis is more precious than rubies.'

'Then I shall be happy. Thank you!'

'I may as well meet you at Waterloo, Mr Darnell,' Dulcie put in. 'You'll catch the same train too, Ronny?'

'Sorry I can't. I'm going down in the morning. They want me to manage the fairy lamps. It's to be a regular kick-up apparently.'

'Any one going from . . . here?' Dulcie asked.

'One or two; they want men. I've asked Sankey . . . as a joke.'

'Is it in the best of taste?' Dulcie asked, and Oliver noticed the hardness in her voice. She did not like the garrulous poet.

'I think so. He's tremendously adjustable. To watch him talking to the pater will be a joy. I'm lending him flannels.'

'But he'll want to hold a public meeting or something!' Dulcie complained.

'Not he . . . he'll spend quite a lot of time in the refreshment tent or whatever it is, and be quite happy, and if he talks politics with the pater they'll both thoroughly enjoy it.'

'I suppose there'll be dancing?' Dulcie asked.

'Yes, on the lawn, in the evening. Decorous and ladylike, my dear,' Hutton replied.

'It would be,' Dulcie retorted. 'Twickenham is the most decorous and ladylike place in the outer suburbs, anyway outside its nasty little mean streets.'

'It isn't a bad place,' Hutton said, stirred perhaps by the memory of some old loyalty. 'Anyway, Darnell ought to see something of the suburbs if he's to know this England of ours; and besides, Dulcie, it's no longer fashionable to sneer at the suburbs. The garden will be at its best, too . . .'

'We'll come!' said Dulcie. 'Ah, Fashion! Fashion! What sins are committed in thy name!'

Oliver met her by the big bookstall at Waterloo a few minutes before the two-fifteen left for Twickenham.

Most of their fellow passengers were typical suburbans returning to their various abodes of qualified ruralness, their faces eloquent of their determination to enjoy the forthcoming week-end. The journey occupied forty tedious minutes and involved stopping at many stations on the way.

Twickenham—for all its old-world sound—exhibited the depressing lack of individuality which characterises most London suburbs. It had the same house-agents, coal-dealers, shops, dreadful cabs and lounging workers as all other stations on the outer fringe of that too-great city. Dulcie knew the way to Kingsley Lodge, the big, uncompromising house which had sheltered the Hutton family for thirty years, and she maintained a ceaseless flippancy at the expense of suburbs on the way. The house stood well back from the main road and was approached by a drive bordered by shrubs and lilac trees (a little sad now that they were past their prime, as all living things are).

A trim maid admitted them, and almost at once they were joined by Hutton's sister, a plump, jolly girl with a laughing, sunburnt face.

'So glad you've come, Dulcie!' she said. When Darnell was introduced to her she shook his hand with a grip which startled him. She was dressed in careless business-like white which contrasted strongly with Dulcie's calculated clothes. Ronny's fiancée wore a beautifully made white serge costume and a tiny, daring little green hat which emphasised the colour of her hair and eyes. Miss Hutton was obviously dressed for tennis, and for nothing else; it is never safe to assume what purpose a well-dressed woman has in mind.

On the lawn they met Hutton and his mother, a stout, genial lady, whose black hair was attractively flecked with gray. She was a little nervous of her

future daughter-in-law, perhaps a little hostile. Mr Hutton loomed up. He was a Yorkshireman, and looked at the new-comers over rakish pince-nez in a way which suggested a mixture of geniality and suspicion. Oliver was at once involved with his host in a discussion of how he had, and how he might have reached Twickenham, from which Ronald Hutton rescued him.

Tennis was already in progress, and white-clad, strenuous girls and men seemed to be everywhere.

After the garden had been duly admired, Oliver found himself with two girls on a seat at the end of it. He was a little troubled because hurried introductions had left him uncertain of the names. One was vaguely Annie—the second girl called her so, a big girl with wavy-brown hair, and an attractive, husky voice; the other, quite nameless as far as Oliver was concerned, was a thin brunette with deep, unwavering brown eyes.

'Isn't it odd we should meet, Mr Darnell,' the nameless one said. 'I know your cousin quite well.' Inevitably she added that the world was a small place.

'My cousin?' Oliver asked, with obvious surprise.

'Yes. Margaret Halliday; she *is* your cousin? Surely there can't be two men who so exactly fit the description she gave me?'

'Oh, yes . . . it is odd, isn't it?'

'She told me about you in one of her letters, particularly of a wonderful sketch you made of her.'

'It was nothing,' he replied uneasily.

'She's going to stay with me. Another girl and I have a flat near Richmond Bridge.'

'That will be nice,' Oliver said.

'It must be interesting to be a painter,' Annie said inanely. She was the kind of girl who cannot help making inane remarks, a subsection of that greater class which does its best, and means well.

'I think all creative work is very wonderful,' the nameless one continued. 'I have tried desperately hard to do really good work, but I'm reconciled to hack-work now.'

'You write?' Oliver asked at a venture.

'Badly . . . I manage to sell it, though. . . . What do you think of Margaret's short stories?'

'I've only read one or two,' Oliver said. 'I liked them.'

'It seems easier for a man to do things,' said Annie helpfully.

The conversation was interrupted at this point—the whole party seemed in the main a series of interruptions—by Miss Hutton, who wanted Annie to make up a four. The nameless one rose when the other departed. 'We may as well watch,' she said.

Of the two courts one was very indifferent; it had only recently been filched from the vegetable garden. The other was 'not so foul,' as Miss Hutton said, and it was on this court that most of the play took place.

'I admire people who can be really strenuous over games,' the nameless one said to him. 'It shows they are capable of enthusiasm.'

'They are so serious about it,' Oliver said. 'It doesn't seem like *play*.'

'It's a tournament this afternoon, of course.'

Conversation trickled out; they watched the mixed doubles. As Hutton had said, it showed Oliver a new type. At the end of the court nearest to them was a girl of nineteen or so who served like a man, and darted about the court with amazing agility. She had flung herself whole-heartedly into the game, and played to win with a desperation which was almost passionate. Her partner, by contrast, was casual.

'Oh, damn!' she said, as she missed a stroke.

The people who heard her laughed as if she had

made a joke, but Oliver, who was unaware that the word constitutes one of the few certain laughter-producers of the modern English stage, could not understand why. The girl at his side saw that he frowned. The simple, meaningless little swear-word (it is used by all really modern curates even) appeared to Oliver to be a part of that lack of reserve of control which he had come always to expect in Englishwomen . . . excepting, of course, in one woman.

It is an odd reflection. All men, of all nationalities, regard some one woman as an exception to the habits for which they condemn the other sex. And to a great extent they are right, for most women *are* exceptions.

'I'm afraid you're not very fond of tennis, Mr Darnell,' the girl at his side suggested nervously.

'Eh . . . no!' he said, thrusting his thoughts from him.

And in silence they continued to watch the game, since there was nothing else for them to do.

The inevitable interruption came as a great relief to the nameless one. She was quite uncertain how to deal with this sombre, silent man.

'I say, Darnell, you might look after Sankey, will you?' Hutton (the interrupter) said. 'He's just turned up and I'm due to play on the other court. Introduce him to the pater and leave 'em to talk, will you?' He darted away, leaving them with each other.

'You will excuse me?' Darnell asked the girl, who smiled and slightly inclined her head.

'Nice little place Hutton's got down here!' Sankey said. Hutton's immaculate flannels were just a shade too small for him, but he was thoroughly at home in them none the less. But Sankey always was at home.

'Very!' said Oliver.

'What's the matter?' Sankey asked. 'You seem unduly thoughtful, and, apparently, your thoughts do not agree with you.'

'I am depressed,' Oliver said. 'It is not right that women should swear, that they should play games with men . . .'

'You *are* a dull dog,' Sankey protested. 'Why can't you enjoy what God sends to you. Here you have a garden, wealth, everything man may want—all of which, of course, have been provided for the Hutton family (and us) by a down-trodden proletariat—and you take on a green tinge because, apparently, some woman has sworn. What did she say?'

'Damn!' said Oliver.

'And that depressed you?'

'It seemed suddenly to show that the women here were the same as the women in London, that they had no sense of reticence, of seclusion.'

'Oh, my Gawd!' Sankey burst out. 'Why should she have "a sense of seclusion," whatever it is? Why shouldn't the little dears swear as much as ever they want to. Besides—"Damn!" You blessed innocent, it's used at temperance meetings and Y.W.C.A.'s.'

'You do not understand,' said Oliver curtly.

'Can man be free and woman still a slave?' Sankey quoted.

'They need not be slaves . . . I think it is all wrong here. Women were not meant to parade streets and theatres, to flaunt themselves on tennis courts, to swear. They are too positive altogether. And what do they do with it all . . . simply become a drag on men who wish to work.'

'You're a reactionary!' said Sankey. 'A Tory! Your ideas are about three hundred years out of date, young feller! Besides, a man who *wishes* to work deserves what he gets.'

'In my country nothing is ever out of date,' Oliver replied.

'Ah, I suppose you *would* regard China as your country. Still, it's no use your trying to force an English girl's foot into a Chinese boot, my dear Darnell. Who's this funny old josser bearing down on us?'

'That is our host,' said Oliver. 'I will introduce you.'

The tall Yorkshire man looked over his glasses and absorbed Sankey in a long, shrewd gaze.

'One of Ronny's friends, I suppose?' he hazarded, when the introduction had been made.

'I think I may claim that honour, Mr Hutton,' Sankey said, meeting his gaze with calm unconcern.

'In Chelsea?' the elder man continued.

'Yes,' admitted Sankey. 'I am an artist,' he added, with simplicity.

'Mrrr!' the old gentleman grunted. 'Seems to me a terrible waste of time, all this art business, Mr Sankey. You're no connection of the famous revivalist of your name, I suppose?'

'No!' said Sankey shortly. 'I didn't quite grasp what you said about art,' he went on, with ominous calmness.

The old gentleman with the levellest of blue eyes, looked over his glasses at his guest.

'It seems to me,' he repeated, 'that art is rather a terrible waste of time.'

'Art is the one thing which differentiates Man from the Beast,' replied Sankey in his most polite tone.

'I've heard all kinds of things said about art,' the old gentleman said. 'Ronny's very fond of trotting them out. Still, with all respect, it doesn't seem right to me that young men should waste their time painting pictures.'

'Would you limit it to old men?' Sankey asked.

'Yes, as a kind of hobby,' the old gentleman insisted.

'I'm afraid we don't touch anywhere, Mr Hutton,' Sankey replied, with a hopeless smile. 'To me a beautiful picture, or a great poem is of infinitely more importance than a desert of mere work. Man works to satisfy his body's wants. An artist, to satisfy his soul.'

'Mrrr . . .' the old gentleman said again. 'But I thought you modern people didn't believe in the soul?'

For the first time Sankey suspected that the old gentleman was not entirely serious, that, in the expressive modern phrase, his leg was being pulled.

'The artist *must* believe in the existence of the soul. Sometimes I think that only the artists have souls, that a soul is merely the expression of one's sense of beauty.'

'That is even more limited than the Mohammedan belief,' Mr Hutton said. 'Only men have souls, according to that faith.'

'I have accused Mr Darnell of that very belief this afternoon,' Sankey said.

'And are you a Mohammedan?' Mr Hutton asked Oliver. Nothing in Ronny's friends surprised him.

'I always think it difficult to label my beliefs,' said Oliver, who was very conscious of the blue eyes which looked at him, now, over the rakish pince-nez.

'Quite right, Mr Darnell,' the old gentleman said with a chuckle, and passed on.

'Silly old windbag!' commented Sankey.

'I rather thought he held his own with you, Sankey,' Oliver replied. 'You don't seem so effective in white clothes as you do in your usual garb.'

'I don't *feel* so effective. Hutton said something about champagne cup. Have you knowledge of it?'

'Yes. I'll take you to the refreshment tent,' Oliver said. But at the door he was held up.

'Ah, there you are, Mr Darnell! I've been looking

for you everywhere. Ronny is hopelessly involved in an interminable tournament, and I'm bored. Run along, Sankey, and be fed. You shall show me round the garden, Mr Darnell !'

Dulcie Whittingham was the one girl of whom Sankey was afraid.

'Right-o!' he said cheerfully, and disappeared into the tent.

Oliver fell in with the arrangement since Dulcie was a young lady with a charm which was eighty per cent. sheer insistence. But the girl he wanted to talk to now was the little brunette whose name he didn't know, and with whom Margaret Halliday was going to stay; he regretted his silence when he had had the opportunity of talking.

'I knew you loved gardens, Mr Darnell,' Dulcie was saying.

'So?'

'Oh, yes. Don't you remember that night at the studio when you spoke of Luen-chi's Chinese garden. I have never seen you so enthusiastic.'

'Yes, that is a beautiful garden. It is strange that you should remember it, and also the name of my respected grandfather.'

'It's just odd things like that I do remember. This garden is quite pretty, but it's like ten thousand other such gardens in my country. I should *love* to see that garden of your respected grandfather. I'm sure it's new and strange.'

'It is three hundred years old, at least . . .'

'New to me, I mean. China is old, everywhere, but it would be all so new to me . . . I should love China. Aren't those violas a perfectly gorgeous colour?'

'I was looking at them,' Oliver said. 'It is strange that you should be so desirous of new things. I have a friend in the country who also desires new things . . .'

'New faces, new countries, new experiences,' Dulcie said. 'New sensations . . .'

'Sometimes I think I shall go back to my home in China and never leave it again. Simply paint the pictures which amuse me and live in Luen-chi's garden.'

'That would be wicked,' she said.

'Wicked?'

'Yes. You are a great artist. You have no right to hide yourself away from the world. Shall we sit here?' They had come to the seat under the elm-tree at the top of the garden.

'Please. It is cool and green . . .'

'And yet the air is full of the vague noise from outside the garden. It seems impossible to achieve absolute quiet unless one is miles away from London.'

'It is very nice here.'

'Oh, by the way, Mr Darnell, I've some people coming to my studio on Wednesday evening. I wonder if you would like to come too? They're not the ordinary Chelsea crowd and you might be interested.'

'I shall be pleased,' he said.

'Then roll along about seven-thirty. I think I shall have to go to Cornwall soon. London is becoming too stuffy for words.'

He was looking in front of him and her eyes were on him as she was speaking. For a while she sat in silence watching him, and wondering what was passing in his mind. His clear-cut profile was, to her superficial glance, a typical English face, and she noticed the splendid line of his neck and jaw. But there was that about the big mouth which puzzled her, a slight, almost imperceptible, drooping at the corners, which might have passed unnoticed if one had not examined the face carefully. The wistfulness, the desire in the face, were as matters of no moment to her. She imagined

that he was a bit off colour, as she herself would have put it.

'I think I, too, shall leave London,' he said.

'You would love Cornwall,' she assured him.

'It does not attract me,' he said. 'I should like to live in some place from which one could get to London easily, and yet be near the country. Twickenham is such a place, I should think.'

'Twickenham!' she repeated, with horror in her voice.

'There is the river!' he said.

'And what a river! The human gutters of Hounds-ditch empty into it all through the week-end. It is exceptional to see a person who can manage a boat decently.'

'Still, I shall probably come to it, I think. I could keep my studio on, as well.'

'What an odd taste!' She was frankly puzzled, and was watching his face carefully.

'I may do nothing of the kind,' he said, with a smile. 'We shall see.'

'Here's Ronny!' she said. Oliver did not notice the slight frown which flitted across her face.

'Oh, here you are! I've been all over the place for you,' the new-comer said. 'I was knocked out—the final will be in a few minutes. They want every one down there.'

'Rather!' said Dulcie. 'The tennis has been very so-so, so far, Ronny.' She rose as she was speaking, and the three of them rejoined the people who were in the lower garden.

Sankey and Mr Hutton had again collided and were carrying on an animated talk a little apart from the rest of the party. 'But, my dear sir, I tell you . . .' They caught Sankey's words as they passed, and Oliver noticed that Hutton smiled.

'They'll do each other good,' he said briefly. 'Now, look here, Dulcie, you've got to be a perfect little lady for the next hour and then we'll be able to be on our own. You'd better talk to the mater and so on, there's a dear.'

'For your sweet sake,' she said, with a laugh, and left them to join the little crowd round Mrs Hutton.

CHAPTER XI

A PLEASANT EVENING

WHEN Oliver knocked at the door of Dulcie Whittingham's studio the following Wednesday evening, he was in a much happier frame of mind. Margaret had written to tell him that she was probably coming quite soon to the flat near Richmond Bridge, and how extraordinary it was that he had met Sophie—which was the name of the little brunette. And wasn't she a dear girl? And so on. A bubbling, friendly letter which showed clearly the excitement under which the writer was labouring at the mere prospect of London. He had read and re-read the letter, seeking for meanings in its phrases where nothing but one simple meaning was. The letter was in his pocket as he stood in the low passage which led to Dulcie's studio.

Dulcie herself answered his ring, and of necessity his thoughts of Margaret receded into his sub-conscious mind.

'So you *have* come!' she said, with a quiet smile of welcome. 'Come in. Put your hat there,' she indicated a little recess very like the one in his own studio.

Although it was June, a tiny fire was burning in the low grate, so tiny indeed that but little warmth was felt from it.

'That's a comfy chair,' she said. 'And there are cigarettes. My other guests are not here yet.'

She sank with easy grace into a chair opposite to him and watched him as he lit his cigarette.

'Won't you smoke?' he asked. She refused.

'I like that,' he indicated a picture over the fireplace.

'Yes, it's not bad,' she said. 'It's one of Posuet's.'

His eyes were wandering round the studio.

'That's rather nice, too,' she said, nodding towards a picture behind him. He rose and stood a while looking at it, his back towards her.

From that picture he went to the next one, and so on, all round the room, commenting on the ones he liked, silent when the work did not please him. His hostess watched him, a quiet smile on her lips. She was dressed in a simple black silk frock, such as any suburban miss might have worn, the discreetest of frocks, a frock which had been made for her specially, and to her dressmaker's amazement. Her elbows were on the arms of her chair, the tips of her long white fingers touched immediately beneath her chin. Occasionally he turned to her with some remark.

The studio was lit with the soft red light from one big silk lantern and the faint, flickering firelight.

'My maid is ill,' she said. 'Aren't maids an intolerable nuisance! Just as I have a few people coming, too . . .'

'It is cosy here,' he said.

'I'm glad you like it,' she replied. 'At least, I hope that was what your meagre words said. An Englishman—the ordinary, conventional kind, I mean—would have told me a dozen times by now that the studio was charming. You say nothing at all . . . until you admit that it is cosy. We thank you, sir, for your approval.'

'It's a *most* charming studio,' he said. 'I like it very much. But there is none of your own work on the walls!'

'No!' she said.

'But why? I should like to see your work.'

'I can't paint worth twopence, Mr Darnell,' she said with a laugh. 'When I look at old Trollope's work—at a dozen men's work, and particularly now that I have seen yours, I know that I am simply wasting good

paint and canvas. I'm going in for plain needlework in future.'

Trollope's words came back to his mind.

'I am sorry you think that,' he said. He came back to his chair and noticed that she had very beautiful ankles.

'You have a nice instep,' he said.

'They aren't bad, are they?' She held up her ankle and looked down at it with a whimsical smile on her face. 'That is the first nice thing you have ever said to me, Mr Darnell,' she said.

The telephone bell went.

'Excuse me,' she said, and crossed to it.

'Yes. I'm Miss Whittingham . . . who are you? . . . speak up, please . . . yes, that's better. What? You can't come. But you *must* come. I've got dinner all ready. My atrocious maid is ill and I've done it myself. It's simple too horrid of you. . . . Well, *you* come alone if he can't. . . . I think it's mean of you. Mr Darnell is here already.'

She slammed the receiver down.

'Isn't it too abominably awful of the people. They aren't coming!'

'I am sorry!' said Oliver.

'Confound them!' she said. 'I'm sorry. I know you don't like to hear women swear . . . well, we'd better get on with our meal. You'll have to eat *enormously*, Mr Darnell. I have prepared for four.'

'I will do my best,' Oliver said, and thus it came about that he found himself alone with Dulcie in the little dining-room behind the studio.

As Dulcie had told her friend on the 'phone (to the latter's great amusement, for the whole affair was much more calculated than it appeared to Oliver), the table was laid for four. It was an exceedingly well-chosen little meal, and Dulcie presided with a cleverness which

put her guest entirely at his ease. It was the daintiest of little dining-rooms, panelled and furnished in dark oak, which made the girl's colouring even more striking than Nature had done. The glass and silver were partly gifts from her family and partly 'picked up' in the little antique shops in Chelsea and Kensington. There was no table-cloth, and the soft light was reflected in the dark, polished oak of the table.

'What will you drink, Mr Darnell? I have some of my father's claret—a wine I never touch—which I understand is good, and there is one bottle of champagne, the sad remnant of a case I bought on a day of opulence.'

'Claret will do admirably,' Oliver said. He opened the bottle as she flitted about, the daintiest of waitresses.

It certainly was quite amusing. In his past life it would have been impossible, but really there was no harm in sitting with this cultured girl who talked of a hundred interesting persons and things the while she managed the meal in a manner which argued a remarkable degree of domestic efficiency. There was no hitch. He admired the deft way in which she made coffee, and certainly as she knelt down in front of the little fire in the studio (to which they had returned) the colours the firelight discovered in her hair were charming. The coffee was good, and afterwards they each smoked a cigarette. Oliver did not like women who smoked, but Dulcie smoked with an air of disarming innocence which was 'somehow different'; she was not so astoundingly expert with the cigarette as some of the girls he had noticed in Hutton's studio.

'I'm going to surprise you, Mr Darnell,' she said, after a meditative silence. 'I am inclined to agree with many of your ideas about women.'

'I really haven't any definite ideas,' he replied. 'In the main they are instinctive, part of the atmosphere of the country where I was brought up.'

'No, but I can see that there are things in the modern girl—the modern London girl—which you do not like. One cannot help being, to a certain extent, part of the age and country in which one lives, but I could easily find myself in agreement on many things with my great-grandmother. In essentials, even in Occidental countries, I don't think that women ever alter. This cigarette now,' Dulcie glanced momentarily at the article in question. 'I don't—deep down—want it. One gets into habits . . . conforms without thought.' She threw the luckless cigarette—which she had very nearly finished—away, with a gesture.

'It is very rude of me,' Oliver said, 'to have let you see that I objected in any way. What right have I to?'

'That is so, of course. But, personally, I hate to think that my friends—and I hope you are my friend—look askance at anything I do.' She spoke convincingly and with consummate naturalness. 'One has so few friends,' she added, gazing down into the fire. She was almost sufficiently sure of herself to allow her lower lip to tremble, but she hesitated, fearing an anti-climax.

In the firelight her profile was very beautiful. It had taken to itself a wistfulness, a meditation, and Oliver watched her, wondering at the emotions which possessed her. On a sudden he saw her as the inevitable product of an age of which he knew nothing, an age whose values were different from his own, as a woman who was no more responsible for herself and for her ideas and life than he was for his.

'After all,' he said, 'when in Rome one should be a Roman. And why shouldn't a girl smoke if she wishes to? If it is wrong in a girl it is wrong in a man. I think that any objection I may have had arose from the type of girl whom one sees smoking habitually.' The faintest, fleetest suspicion of a smile which hovered

for a second round her pretty lips was lost on Oliver. Here was success, greater than Dulcie had hoped for. That, within an hour or so of his arrival, Oliver should be defending in her the things which he condemned in others of her sex, was very much to her liking. She knew, none better!—that in the eyes of a man in love the loved one is without fault, or at least that she is certain of having every possible and impossible excuse made for her. Dulcie had achieved a distinct advance.

'The association of ideas,' was what Dulcie said, and she said it as if she were pondering his words, 'I think it is unavoidable in a man of imagination,' she continued. 'And the type of girl that smokes in public is really very terrible, although I believe that smoking has spread to the young ladies of the suburbs. I think you are right to object to women smoking in public. I do.'

'The whole idea of women being so . . . er . . . definitely *women* in public is foreign to me,' Oliver said.

'I know what you mean,' Dulcie said quietly. 'Do go on smoking. I love the smell of tobacco, even if I don't smoke a great deal.'

She was sitting, opposite to him, watching him gravely.

'Isn't it funny,' she said, 'how sometimes a poem persists in one's mind; a line even . . .'

'I know,' he said. 'There are lines of Kipling which do . . . not that I like Kipling. And Henley . . .'

'To-night I've got a little poem of Yeats in my brain; you know it, I'm sure.'

She recited the poem which Mr Yeats calls 'A Fragment,' and her quiet, sure voice gave the wonderful words their full value.

'Yes. I know it,' Oliver said. 'It is very beautiful . . . it calls up images, visions.'

'It usually haunts me when I am just the least little

bit miserable,' she went on. '"Love fled, and paced upon the mountain overhead, and hid his face amid a cloud of stars." There's the very essence of melancholy in it.'

'But are you miserable . . . ?'

'Not crudely like that . . . somewhere, deep down in me, there is a feeling of—how shall I say it?—a gentle melancholy. It's quite a jolly thing to have really, like a hopeless affection, or an old, old love.'

'I thought you were particularly cheerful to-night,' he said. 'No doubt your friends not having come has upset you.'

'It was annoying . . . but now I don't mind. I've enjoyed our *tête-à-tête* quite a lot. . . . That silly feeling of sadness, seriousness, call it what you will, is not a reflection on you, Mr Darnell.' She laughed lightly as she finished speaking.

'I am glad,' he said.

'On the contrary, it's rather a compliment. It is not every one with whom one can be so serious. Most people insist on flippancy, particularly in a girl.'

'Life *is* serious,' he said, and she laughed at his tone.

'I once promised to teach you to dance,' she said. 'You ought to learn, you know. You miss half the fun in London if you don't dance. I'll start the gramophone. . . . It's a good one, and really not so intolerable as most of them are.'

She put on a ragtime.

'Come on!' she said, in a tone of playful command.

Only half reluctantly he rose.

'You will find me terribly awkward,' he said.

'But it's so simple,' she said. 'Look. There's only this step in it. So, and so, and so. Do that now. We don't really need the gramophone while you practise the step.' She shut it off and it petered out in an angry whir which is the nature of gramophones.

Oliver repeated the steps she had shown him.

'That's all right!' she said encouragingly. 'Now do it with me.' She took his right hand and placed it on her waist; the other she held. 'So!' she said. 'And so . . . and so. That's really not half bad.'

They repeated the steps half a dozen times.

'Now we'll try it with the gramophone,' she said, and put on a record which spoke of the unquenchable American desire to be somewhere else, with or near cotton blossoms for preference, and elderly nigger ladies.

'Isn't it simple?' she asked, after they had danced until the record came to an end.

'It does seem so,' he said. 'It looked so complicated when others were doing it.'

'We'll try another record,' she said, 'a tiny bit faster this time.'

Again he placed his hand on her waist, and again her face was near his as they danced up and down the studio. Once he met her eyes, very near his. She dropped her gaze at once . . .

'I will steer you,' she said. 'You just think of the steps. . . . You're coming on wonderfully.'

Suddenly as they danced she seemed to move in his arms. She was nearer to him; he was more conscious of her. Her head was touching his shoulder and her hair brushed his face. There was a faint perfume about her hair which seemed to him to be as fire. She was in his arms, definitely in his arms; a second before his hand had been placed on her waist and the other touched her fingers. . . . The perfume of her hair seemed to be in his brain . . . her eyes, he saw, were closed. . . .

The record came to an end.

'That was splendid,' she said. 'You'll make a most excellent dancer, if you stick to it.'

He said that the dancing had made him a little dizzy and that he would rather not dance any more.

'It is frequently so in beginners,' she assured him. 'You'll get used to it, though. I never get dizzy now. I used to at first.'

They talked awhile of pictures and painters. She was intelligent, sympathetic . . . clever. About half-past ten he left.

'Thanks, most awfully,' he said as he went. 'It's been a jolly evening.'

'I'm sorry that my friends failed me, though,' she said. 'I'm afraid it's been rather dull for you. Come again, whenever you've nothing more amusing to do. Good-bye.'

She closed the door gently and returned to her studio, where, for some seconds, she gazed thoughtfully at her reflection in the looking-glass.

She then lit a cigarette.

As Oliver left Dulcie's studio he ran into Ronald Hutton who was apparently going to it.

'*Hallo!*' the latter said, and the surprise in his voice was obvious. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've been to see Miss Whittingham,' Oliver said.

'Mmm . . . that's rather obvious.'

Followed a silence.

'I'll walk back a bit with you, Darnell,' the other said. 'I've been wanting a talk with you.'

'So?'

'Yes. . . . I hate interfering, but you don't seem to be aware that *I* am engaged to be married to the lady you've just been to see.'

'I do,' said Oliver. 'Trollope told me so.'

'Oh . . . well, in England, men don't go to see girls who are engaged to other men.'

'But Miss Whittingham invited me. There were to have been others . . . '

'Were to have been?'

'Yes. They could not come.'

'Mmm. You know, Darnell, I'm not blaming you, but I'm in a peculiar position with Dulcie. We agreed that we should each have absolute individual liberty, so, in fairness, I can't complain to *her*. I thought I would tell you.'

'You don't want me to go there any more?'

'Roughly, that is so.'

'Then I won't,' Oliver said. 'I am not surprised. In my country it would not be allowed. But if you give her absolute freedom you have no right to interfere. We do not give our women absolute freedom. It is not good.'

'Well, we do,' Hutton said, missing altogether Oliver's point. 'Still, Dulcie is always developing grand passions here and there. You're apparently it at the moment. Obviously, with a girl like Dulcie, a thing which is excellent in theory may not be so admirable in practice. I sometimes wish that she were an ordinary suburban girl and that we were already married in the suburban way. I belong to the suburbs at bottom.'

'I understand that. What I cannot understand is the talk about absolute liberty.'

'But Dulcie is an extraordinary girl,' Hutton insisted. 'And besides, if one is fond of a girl it complicates one's theories horribly.'

'That is so,' agreed Oliver.

'You don't believe in equality and all that kind of thing where women are concerned?' Hutton asked.

'I do not,' said Oliver. 'Any more than I believe in the equality of fire and water.'

'It takes a bit of courage to admit that, in modern life,' Hutton remarked. 'It's fearfully reactionary, you know, and against the spirit of the time.'

'The spirit of the time?'

'Yes, the modern spirit.'

'But women never change,' Oliver uttered the words as if they were axiomatic.

'In a sense . . . that is so. But still . . .'

They parted at the door of Oliver's studio. They were very friendly. Hutton had twice used the phrase, 'men of the world,' in his talk, which, of course, shows how friendly they were, how completely they understood each other.

And Dulcie, smoking in her studio, never knew of the meeting.

CHAPTER XII

CHINATOWN

WITH the regularity characteristic of her life at King's Oaks, Mrs Darnell wrote to her grandson every Sunday afternoon. Invariably she filled two sheets, and no more. Her letters always contained admirable and anxious advice, for the old lady was filled with a profound suspicion of London and the things which, in her mind, it symbolised. It was from one of her letters Oliver learnt that Margaret was coming to town on the following Thursday. Mrs Darnell disapproved entirely. Margaret was undutiful and ungrateful, she wrote; and it was clear that Oliver's grandmother entirely failed to gauge the unrest in the generation that was arising around her. It is a misunderstanding which has come down with the centuries, and which will last so long as the years have power to dim intelligence.

But the one fact Oliver seized on in her long letter was that Margaret was coming to town. The most likely train was the one which left Northboro' at ten forty-five, and which arrived at St Pancras at noon. He made up his mind, at once, to meet it.

Thursday came with unnatural slowness, and noon found him waiting in the big station. He scanned the faces of the crowd anxiously and waited until there was no possibility of her having been on the train.

She had not come.

He found that the next train arrived at half-past one, and wandered about the unlovely streets around St Pancras whilst he waited.

This time he saw her almost as soon as the train

came to a standstill, and he made his way to her eagerly.

'I say!' she said, when she saw him. 'This is jolly decent of you. But how did you know?'

'Grandmother told me . . . I think *you* might have done, Margaret. But we must rescue your luggage.'

'That's gone on,' she said. 'All I have is this suit-case.'

'You haven't lunched?'

'In a way, yes, but the excitement has made me hungry.'

'Good. Shall we go into the buffet here?'

She was wildly happy and seemed altogether a different person from the girl he had known in Northboro'.

'I'm on my own,' she said. 'I wouldn't let Bobby Morden come with me, although the dear boy wanted to. And I wouldn't write to you, because I knew you would come and fuss round.'

'I should certainly have come,' he said gravely. 'But I promise not to "fuss round."'

'It's awfully good of you, Oliver. But I'm a professional writer, with my living to get. I wouldn't even let Philippa help me. I feel like Dick Whittington. To-morrow I'm going to look up some of the editors who have bought my stories. I'm *sure* that when they know I'm doing it in earnest, for a living, they'll buy even more.'

'I hope so,' said Oliver.

'Oh, and what did you think of Sophy? Isn't she a dear?'

'I didn't see much of her, I'm afraid. I wanted to talk more to her, but we were interrupted. They keep on interrupting one at a tennis party.'

'I'm going to live with her and another girl. In a flat near Richmond Bridge. I've been there once before. It's a delicious place. All the people in white on the river. Particularly Sunday.' Northboro'

hibernates every Sunday . . . no, that's absurd . . . goes to sleep. You only hibernate once a year, don't you? I say, this fruit salad is most awfully nice. You ought to have some!'

'You have staked a lot on this visit, Margaret?' he asked.

'Everything!' she said. 'It's success . . . or Northboro'. I know the odds are horribly against me, but I'm confident. I know, of course, I ought to be contented with Northboro'; Philippa is most awfully good. But I can't help it, Oliver. The dear thing is heartbroken at my coming. I'm going to write every night to her . . . it's something in my blood, I think. But I *hate* Northboro', and all that it stands for, just as much as Philippa and Granny love it.'

'It is a splendid day. Why not get a taxi to Richmond . . . an open one would be very nice,' Oliver said.

'But it's ten miles!' she said.

'So much the better. We can tell the driver to pick the most interesting route. I'm almost certain that we can go over Wimbledon Common and through Richmond Park.'

'I should love to,' confessed Margaret. 'But I oughtn't to let you. I *really* mean to be on my own, you know.'

'But I want you to. You're not accepting a favour, you're conferring one.'

'I should like it so much that it weakens all my principles,' she said, with a laugh. 'It must be awfully thrilling to be wealthy.'

'My respected grandfather is wealthy,' he explained.

'And your pictures will make you so, anyway. Yes. You shall disgorge some of your ill-gotten gain on a taxi. After to-day I must economise . . . as far as

that goes, the taxi is an economy for me, if you pay for it !' she added laughingly.

'Then you shall begin to be economical to-day,' he said.

It was in the days before the great upheaval had corrupted the souls of the taxi-men, and there was no difficulty in getting a cab. Oliver's instructions gave the driver's imagination full scope, and he took them through Trafalgar Square and Whitehall to the river and along the Embankment on the Middlesex side, where the wealthy Socialists live. He kept as near to the river as he could, as far as Putney, and then went up the hill to the common at the top, and through the park into Richmond. There was a warm breeze, and they both thoroughly enjoyed the drive; they made guesses at the buildings which they passed, and were both in exceedingly good spirits when they came to Sophy's flat just on the other side of the old gray bridge.

'Now you've come, you'd better come in and see Sophy,' she said. 'I can hardly send you away at once.'

'You couldn't possibly,' he agreed.

Sophy awaited them.

'I've brought Oliver, or rather he brought me in a taxi,' Margaret said to her. 'But I knew you'd give him a cup of tea, dear.'

'Of course ! Come in !'

The flat was modern and furnished with taste, although within the limited means of women who earned their bread in one of the most fiercely competitive markets of the world. An old carved, grandfather clock in the tiny hall, the one article of considerable value in the establishment, had the unmistakable look of an heirloom about it, but there was that in the flat, an individuality, a sense of home which no rooms, or apartments, or lodgings ever had or ever will have.

They had tea in a room whose furnishing had required great ingenuity, and Sophy laughingly betrayed the origin of some of the things which had been made with intelligence and the expenditure of a few pence.

'You must come and see us again, Mr Darnell,' Sophy said, when he went. 'Sunday evening is our "At home." You'll find sandwiches and coffee here, and sometimes quite amusing people.'

'You are very good,' Oliver replied.

'Good-bye, Oliver, and thank you so much,' Margaret said. 'I will let you know how I get on with my work!'

They shook hands affectionately.

He walked slowly over the bridge, and for a while watched the boats setting out from the steps on the Surrey side, and listened to the raucous directions shouted by the boatmen to the more flagrantly inexpert of the boaters.

He had dinner at a café half-way up the hill, and was a little disturbed when he paid his bill by the haughtiness of the exceedingly pretty girl in the pay-box.

He then inquired his way back to Chelsea from the policeman on point duty at the bridge, who confused him with detailed instructions, so that in the end he obtained another taxi. He failed, however, in his effort to return by the exact route he and Margaret had come by.

'Blurry alien,' was the taxi-driver's unspoken comment, after vainly endeavouring to recognise Oliver's description. 'Right y're, sir. Jump in!' were his uttered words.

Oliver had every intention of going to Sophy's flat on Sunday evening, and would have done so, even if it had not been for the accidental meeting in Trafalgar Square on Sunday morning. He had ridden into London on the top of a bus, as he often did, meaning to get lunch in one or other of the Soho restaurants which he

had come to know. He was standing on the steps of St Martin's Church, idly watching the crowd, when he saw Margaret Halliday coming towards him. She was apparently as interested in the scene around her as he was, and would have passed him by unnoticed. He stepped down, almost on to her, and stood with his hat in his hand.

'Where on earth have you sprung from, Oliver?'

'I was standing on the steps there, watching the crowd.'

'I've heard that one always meets people one knows in London,' she said. 'I've been to the service in the Abbey. The music was gorgeous. It seemed more of a display though, than a service.'

'One morning, perhaps, you will take me?' he asked.

'Rather,' she said. 'What are you going to do now?'

'I propose to take you to lunch at a little Bohemian restaurant in Soho which is—so Trollope assures me, and he knows—the only one which has not yet been absorbed by some vague place he calls Surbiton.'

'It's not expensive?' she asked.

'No. Quite cheap.'

'Then we'll go. I was just the least little bit lonely when you sprang out of the great city on to me. I've often wanted to see Soho. . . . It's one of those places one hears so much about.'

Tarroni's is situated in a little turning at the back of Shaftesbury Avenue: a dismal little turning. The unpretentious front it presents to the world is not encouraging, and probably accounts for the lack of patronage which Surbiton (and all the other Surbitons) give it.

Inside, however, it is different.

The napery on the little tables is beautifully white, and the many pictures on its walls have, in the main, been presented to the excellent, if very corpulent,

Tarroni, by his Chelsea friends; a recognition on their part of a fellow artist. It is Tarroni himself who, beamingly, welcomes one as one enters. It is Tarroni himself who recommends with incomparably vivid gesture this or that incomparable dish. It is Tarroni himself who adds the grated Parmesan cheese to his delectable soup. To see Tarroni add cheese to soup is to witness a great rite, a rite carried out with quiet dignity, with an air, with conscious artistry. It is Tarroni himself who laughs . . . and in all London there is no laugh like Tarroni's, spacious and embracing even as Tarroni.

Thither Oliver brought Margaret, aglow with the prospect of new experience, avid for 'copy.'

'Do not look at the exterior,' Oliver urged, and she laughed.

Inside, the first person they met was Trollope, and Oliver paused to introduce him. The old painter bowed. 'I have heard of you,' he said, 'often. Every table is taken, I'm afraid. If you don't mind sharing an old man's table, I shall be charmed.'

Tarroni loomed up. He talked confidentially to them and called Margaret 'Mees.'

The menu was in Italian, and Trollope and Tarroni both assisted her in the choice of her lunch. They were very serious, and there was a sharp passage of arms in Italian between them. The gesticulating Tarroni apparently won.

The restaurateur hovered whilst the waiter brought the soup . . . and then he approached with the dish of grated cheese in one hand, the famous ladle in the other; and a gigantic inclusive smile.

'Cheese? I think so. Yes,' he said, and sprinkled daintily.

'I hope you like Parmesan cheese,' said Oliver, a little dubiously.

'But of course, Mees does,' Tarroni cried. 'But of course . . .'

Fortunately she did . . .

'I am so glad to have met you, Mr Trollope,' she said, after the soup had gone. 'I've heard so much about you. I should love to be famous.'

Trollope smiled; he was still young enough to like this kind of thing.

'You are too kind,' he said.

'Tell me, Mr Trollope, will work, hard work, make one well known?'

'There are many people much better known than I shall ever be who do very little work of any kind. Fame is the most fickle of jades.'

'I am going to work, anyway,' she said. 'I write stories, magazine stories.'

'I'm afraid I don't often read magazines,' he confessed.

'I have read several of Margaret's stories. They are very good,' said Oliver.

'Oliver is prejudiced. Still, I do manage to sell some of them.'

'That is the test . . . in England,' the old painter said. 'And there are worse tests. You have just come to London perhaps?'

'Am I so provincial, then?' she laughed.

'No . . . but your refreshing optimism belongs to the provinces. I don't think London could continue if it were not for the constant stream of optimism it draws from the provinces. Darnell is new to it, but he seems to have developed a depressing kind of pessimism since he came.'

'No. . . . No . . .' Oliver protested.

'I agree with Mr Trollope. You *do* seem depressed.'

'He's doing very little work,' Trollope continued.

'One cannot always work; you yourself have said that.'

'He is too serious,' Margaret said, and then, as if she were changing the subject, she said, 'I suppose Tarroni's is very popular among artists?'

'Nearly every one here is connected with one or other of the arts,' said Trollope. 'Here and there the connection is remote perhaps . . . but still . . .' he finished with a gesture.

He looked at his watch. 'I must be off,' he said. 'To-day I work.'

'Isn't he a *dear*?' Margaret asked, when he had left them.

Oliver was silent a while before he replied:—

'I always think that he has had a big disappointment in his life, that he loved a girl perhaps, and it was not happy. It isn't his work, because he's right at the top.'

'A love affair? How interesting! But what a shame. He is a man who ought to be happy. You can see it in his face. But what was that he was saying about your not working?'

'I didn't for a while, as I told you. I'm all right now. Did you see the editors?'

'Some of them. They are not half as terrible as they are painted. Some of them are tremendously human. Look here, Oliver, I want to ask a favour of you.'

'Please do!'

'I want to go to Chinatown.'

'Chinatown?'

'Yes. Limehouse. I've an idea for a series of stories which must be set in the Chinese quarter in London, and I daren't go down there myself. I don't even know where it is.'

'I don't, either. But I will find out. We will go this afternoon. I'll ask the waiter . . .'

The waiter was encyclopædic, and gave him in the quaintest of broken English, the numbers of the two buses that were necessary.

'You don't expect me to know anything about Limehouse, I hope?' Oliver asked.

'But you're bound to know more than the average Englishman, aren't you?'

'I speak Chinese, of course, but my training and instincts are those of your country.'

'Oh, yes. I *think* of you as English. But the knowledge of the language will be a great help. I want to see an opium den!'

'I'm afraid there aren't any, but we'll go down there and find out . . . it may be rather amusing. They're only labouring Chinese, you know. Poor, hard-working people, in the main seafaring folk, I believe.'

'I don't care so long as they are Chinese. I discussed the idea with the editor of the *Regent Magazine*, and he was quite keen.'

'Then certainly we'll go.'

They changed buses near Aldgate, and were soon in a district which was dull and depressing even when compared with the one they had just left. Warehouses, blocks of untidy shops and untidier dwelling-houses devoid of quaintness and beauty, lined the road along which the bus took them. It might have been Walworth or Hoxton, or any of that deplorable ring of localities which surrounds central London. But as the bus progressed, the character of the district changed. They were obviously coming to the river, to a part of the river which was strange to them, and utterly unlike the pleasurable stream at Richmond.

'Look!' said Margaret excitedly, indicating a small knot of weirdly-garbed black men who were sauntering placidly and aimlessly along the road.

'Sailormen!' Oliver explained; 'in their shore-going clothes.'

There was an occasional Chinaman nearly always in

loose, badly-fitting 'slops' of blue serge and squat cloth cap, beneath which the flat yellow face seemed the oddest thing in the world.

They passed a big seamen's home. Outside it men of all conceivable nationalities were clustered in groups. The bus stopped near them, and the hum and babel of their conversation floated upward. Margaret was fascinated with their brisk gestures. On the outskirts of the crowd there was an altercation followed by blows, but despite the obvious reluctance of the driver, the bus went on. A hundred yards or so farther the conductor came up.

'Pennyfeels,' he said, and they alighted to find themselves at the corner of Pennyfields. The last they saw of the bus was the conductor straining to see all that could be seen of the difference of opinion which still persisted outside the Sailors' Home.

There were many Chinese standing about, most of them apparently contemplating nothing at all with great gravity.

'I'm afraid you'll be horribly disappointed, Margaret,' Oliver said. 'It appears to be a locality where the very poorest of the Chinese live when they come to London.'

'But is this Chinatown?'

'Oh, yes. You see the names are all Chinese, the notices stuck about are in that language. Practically every face you see is Chinese.'

They walked slowly along Pennyfields.

'Look!' Margaret whispered.

She pointed to a very old Chinese with a face the colour of yellow ivory, who was watching them with impenetrable reserve. Never a muscle of the face twitched.

'Could you speak to him, Oliver?'

Oliver did so, and the old Chinese bowed low.

'He's a curio dealer,' Oliver said. 'He wishes us to look.'

They entered the tiny shop and the ancient Chinese switched on the electric light. Margaret was just a little nervous . . . outside, in the street, she had felt as safe as she would have done in Richmond.

The little shop contained wonders in carved ivory, and green and white jade, and after a conversation of placid and pleasant sounds Oliver purchased a weirdly-carved ivory box and a jade brooch of barbarous beauty. The Chinese pointed out the varied qualities of the box with terrifyingly long finger nails which were protected by little silver cases.

'All kinds of people go to that shop,' Oliver told Margaret, when once again they were in the comparatively fresh air of Pennyfields. 'The old chap's probably worth a fortune. He was born in Soo-chow, one of the most beautiful places in the world. It is a pity that he does not return. . . . What is this?'

'This' was the Salvation Army.

Margaret saw a frown cross Oliver's face.

The band of devoted, if misguided people, numbered perhaps a dozen. But they succeeded in making a terrifying noise. The leading singer sang through his nose, but no doubt he was exceedingly pious to make up for it. With one exception, on that particular Sunday afternoon, all the people in the band were white people. The exception was a notable one. It was the drummer. He was a full-blooded Chinese with an enormous head, with a large, flat, yellow face in front of it. On the head rested perilously a very small, soft felt hat. As he hit the drum he smiled beatifically, and, if one judged from his smile alone, he was already basking in that happiness which had freely been promised to his fellow countrymen who were grouped around. They were lounging against doors and wall;

and standing in tiny groups, a circle of unemotional yellow faces which listened to the promises, and to the drum, with the unwavering placidity of their race. There was no resentment in their faces, not even a smile; they just looked at, or through, the well-meaning enthusiasts who were filling Pennyfields with noise. Perhaps their thoughts were far away, in Soo-chow possibly, one of the most beautiful places in the world.

Presently—for all things must come at some time to an end—the meeting was wound up. The little group formed up, and with the moon-faced Chinese drumming time they marched away, leaving behind them the circle of yellow faces which still looked impassively ahead.

'In China,' Oliver said, 'the native priests would be too courteous to go into the English quarter and attempt, with noise, to convert the people who live there to their religion . . .'

Margaret saw that he was annoyed, and remained silent.

They passed on down the street. Here and there Margaret noticed an English girl, and near the end they met a Chinese with a white woman—his wife apparently—and two little half-caste babies. The woman was neatly dressed and her arm was linked with that of her Chinese husband.

But it was at the children that Margaret looked.

They were much more Chinese than English, and out of their big, brown, slanting, baby eyes they looked back at Margaret with the innocent inquiring glance of childhood.

'Poor little mites!' she said aloud. A rush of colour to her cheeks told that she had suddenly appreciated the fact that Oliver himself was as much a half-caste as these quaint children. She wondered if

he had noticed her words. . . . From time to time she glanced up at him. His profile was utterly English, she thought.

At the end of Pennyfields they turned back and wandered along the other side. In one of the windows Margaret noticed a very pretty flaxen-haired white girl. Immediately behind her was a big, and very ugly Chinese.

Oliver was quite different from these people, she was certain.

She noticed many other children. It was clear at a glance, in most cases, which were Chinese children and which were half-castes. Most of the latter were ugly, Margaret noticed, but she made no comment on them. She was thinking.

Of course Sansi was a lady; no doubt that made a difference. And it was Oliver's *father* who was English; that, too, was of importance. Margaret could not conceive that Oliver—the man who had talked to her of art and Toyama, the man who knew the world and its cities—had ever been like these poor little mites who were playing in Pennyfields. And, equally, of course, Oliver was a gentleman.

'You are thoughtful, Margaret,' Oliver said.

'It's a most interesting place.'

'The people here seem to be very depressed,' Oliver remarked. 'They are out of their element. You should see them in one of their own cities, to see them truly. Here there is no colour. Look at their awful clothes! The whole charm of a Chinese city is its wonderful colour. These people have left their sense of colour in China.' She noticed that he spoke contemptuously.

'Still, to me, they are frightfully interesting. What an enormous number of tooth-brushes—such funny little brushes too—there seems to be in the shop windows.'

'Even the very poor in China are careful of their teeth,' Oliver said.

They crossed the road at the end of Pennyfields and passed into Limehouse Causeway, which, together with Pennyfields, constitutes Chinatown.

It was very like the street along which they had already wandered.

'Really, I can't help thinking that the people who have written so much about Chinatown must have been . . . imaginative . . .' Margaret said. 'I expected it to be much more terrible. Everything is so orderly and quiet.'

'The Chinese are the most law-abiding race in the world.'

'But isn't it possible to *see* an opium den? Even if there is no smoking going on.'

'There is very little smoking nowadays. Shall we get some tea here? They have little pastries in the window containing sweet melon, which you would like.'

'I should love to.'

They entered an exceedingly clean little tea-shop, and a few words from Oliver obtained the undivided attention of the little Chinese who owned it. He led them to a small table curtained off from the main part of the tea-shop, and with many bows he went to execute Oliver's order.

The pastries were delicious.

Margaret noticed that the hands of the tea-shop keeper were beautifully shaped; long, tapering, perfect fingers, such as only China can produce. She visualised the fingers of an English tea-shop keeper. . . .

On their way out they found that the little Chinese had produced his wife from somewhere. She had a funny, piquant little face, so intensely Chinese that it made bizarre the European clothes she wore. She carried her baby in her arms and Margaret examined it,

to the mother's great delight. It was like a little doll. Jet black hair fringed its tiny face and it looked up at Margaret with large velvety eyes of the deepest brown. Suddenly it smiled.

'You dear!' Margaret said, and then added words which were neither Chinese nor English, but which Mrs Wo-San understood perfectly.

The father, mother, and babe accompanied their honourable guests to the door.

'That little baby was . . . exquisite,' Margaret said. 'Ever so much prettier than the little babies we have seen in the streets. There seem very few Chinese women in Chinatown, Oliver.'

'That is the only one I have seen.'

'It is a great pity, don't you think?'

'Yes. I suppose it is.'

'But we haven't seen an opium den!' Margaret complained a little later.

'Opium smoking is forbidden. It will be difficult.'

A little later Oliver spoke to an ancient Chinese who appeared to have very great difficulty in understanding him. But after a few minutes' conversation the misunderstanding was not so evident.

'This man will show us a place which *was* an opium den. It is little altered excepting that there is now no smoking there.'

They walked along behind the shuffling figure.

'Personally, like most educated people in China, I have very great contempt for the opium smokers. Sooner or later it kills a man, or drives him mad. All the religions in China forbid it, and the Chinese Government has made enormous efforts to stamp it out. There was a war once, between England and China, because the Chinese wanted to stop it and England insisted on being allowed to export the drug from India.'

The old Chinese stopped at a low archway and said something in his native tongue to Oliver.

He led them through the archway into a yard, at the end of which he opened a door leading to a flight of stairs. They were uncarpeted, and the steps echoed as if the building were empty. At the top, he turned along a low passage leading to a large room, the door of which was standing open.

Around the room were low bamboo couches, separated by screens. It was a dingy place, with a stale and slightly nauseating smell. The only light came from two small windows at the far end.

'Well, this is the opium den you wished to see,' Oliver said, with a smile. 'Rather a dull hole? Probably it's quite well known to the police, and they visit it periodically to see that there is no smoking going on. I don't think that we should stay here. It is only the very poorest of the poor who live about here, you know.'

'But I thought that the opium dens were luxurious . . .'

'Well, here's one, my dear girl. Opium smoking is a vicious and bestial thing, and only outcasts give way to their lower selves enough to indulge in it. Modern, enlightened China forbids it, as utterly as her ancient religions do.'

The old guide was standing silently watching them. Suddenly he murmured something to Oliver, who shrank from him with loathing, and uttered sharp staccato words which made the old man shake with fear. Oliver tossed some coins contemptuously at the other's feet.

'Come, Margaret,' he said. 'We will go.'

He did not speak again until they were in the Causeway.

'What did he say?' urged Margaret. 'I saw it upset you.'

'He is a bad old man. . . . I told you that all the

Chinese hereabouts are poor, simple people. It is vicious old men like that who lead them into trouble. Don't talk about him any more, Margaret. It is not fit that any thought of him should sully your brain. But you have seen an opium den !'

'But there's nothing to write about ! A few cane benches and the peculiar smell, that's all !'

'That's all there is. If you were to come to China, to Soo-Chow, to Toyama on the Japanese sea, where all is peace, you would find beauty, wonderful quiet beauty to write about. Here is no beauty, no colour, only ugliness. This is not China, Margaret . . . not China at all.'

'But I'm sorry there is nothing to write about, Oliver. The most interesting things I have seen are the babies, particularly that sweet little brown-eyed doll in the tea-shop.'

There was still a gesticulating crowd outside the Sailors' Home, but apparently the altercation had come to the appointed end of all altercations. They got a bus near it, and in fifteen minutes they were at a station on the District Railway, from which they could go to Richmond.

Behind them Chinatown pursued the imperturbable tenor of its way. It was quite accustomed to ladies and gentlemen who looked at it with curious, expectant eyes, although, in its bland way, it always wondered why.

CHAPTER XIII

DISCOVERIES

RICHMOND completely loses its charm on Sunday, when few of the people one meets in its streets on week-days are to be seen. Their place is taken by a crowd which surges into the town from Putney, Wandsworth, and the myriad other densely crowded suburbs of south London, a crowd which swarms up the hill and along the river, and penetrates even for a few hundred yards or so into the park. It is the kind of crowd which leaves paper and orange-peel in its wake, and strains one's democratic veneer to transparency.

Margaret commented on the difference as she and Oliver turned into the main road at the top of the steps which lead up from the District Station.

'It is not a very interesting crowd,' Oliver remarked.
'It seems tired.'

Old Thames ambled along under the bridge, contemptuous of the crowd which marred its calm gray colouring, and dissipated even the wonderful silence of its running water.

On the steps below the bridge, the boatmen and trippers haggled; all unconscious of the meaning, the deep meaning, of the ancient river. Motor-buses passed and re-passed, snorting under the restraint which the speed limit across the bridge puts on them.

'I can't help thinking that this gray old bridge was never meant for motor-buses,' Margaret said.

'I have seen similar things in Japan, even. It is progress, I suppose. To me it is simply mad. There seems too many people . . .'

'You can't blame them for coming down here, but they do spoil things.'

It was a relief to turn out of the main stream of the traffic to the quiet backwater of a road where was Sophy's flat. As they came up to the door they heard laughter and voices, and Oliver found himself being introduced by Sophy as 'the famous painter.'

The main room of the flat overlooked the whole stretch of the suffering river, with its myriad boats and hilarious flecks of colour. Down below, the people crossing the bridge were like large, aimless ants.

For the first time Oliver met Gladys Sandys, the girl who shared Sophy's flat. She was a small brown girl, with deep brown eyes and freckles; she lisped slightly and pleasantly. Two men also were present. A long, thin youth, who peered inquiringly through very thick glasses, and talked in a jerky, high voice, and a nondescript individual in blue jacket and white trousers who called Gladys Sandys 'dear.'

'We've had coffee,' Sophy said. 'I'll make you some more, and then we'll have music. It's impossible to go out this evening. Did you ever see such an appalling crowd!'

She departed hospitably, and whilst Margaret was 'taking her hat off,' the tall gentleman and Oliver kept up an anaemic conversation about art, on which the tall gentleman had very decided opinions, which, like most decided opinions, were, in the main, wrong.

Afterwards Gladys played the violin . . . ending with Dvorák's *Humoresque*.

'It's so aptly named, don't you think,' she said, when they had finished applauding her. 'One can sense the humour in it!'

The nondescript individual: 'Oh, quite, dear!'

Oliver talked of Toyama, and the others sat around and listened. He liked talking of Toyama, especially

when he knew that Margaret's eyes were on his face. Had she not been there he would have been silent, and she knew, with a little thrill of pleasure, that he was talking for her. In the subdued light of the flat (subdued by Sophy's sage-green curtains of casement cloth) he was particularly good-looking. Margaret found herself comparing him with the other two men who were present. They were English . . . what was the great difference between them? . . . She strove to put it into words. It had been a delightful day for her; Oliver had been interesting the whole time. There was a sympathy, an understanding about him which one never found in Bobby Morden, for example. And yet . . . Still, she did not formulate the sub-conscious thought.

The only Sunday evenings which Oliver had previously spent with Margaret had been in Northboro', in the brooding, enervating atmosphere which comes to that town with the Sabbath. In the little flat over the river all was different; the muted noises of the alien crowd outside came up to them with the warm evening air. Down-stream, from the window, they could see the sky beyond Isleworth, brilliant with the magic colour of the dying day.

Margaret sang one of Chaminade's dainty songs, and afterwards some of Amy Woodford Finden's sombre love-songs (which, at the time, had a vogue), music which had no place in the stern Sabbath ritual of King's Oaks. Oliver stood on the balcony, just outside the open window. To him, as he listened, the girl at the piano lacked the intimate personal something which had been a great part of her charm in Northboro'. She was singing to the others, not to him alone. In Northboro' her grandmother and her aunt had heard her Sabbath music so often that they no longer listened; they might put aside their reading as she sang, but

quite certainly they had not listened as he had done, did not drink in the music with eyes on the girl's profile, lost to all the universe save Margaret.

'I love Margaret's voice,' Sophy said, when she had finished. 'It seems to get the last ha'porth out of both the words and the music.'

The thin gentleman played a waltz which he had composed himself. Just a little thing, which he rather liked, he explained. Politeness demanded a certain enthusiasm, which he received with stern, unbending English modesty.

Later Margaret sang again. This time Oliver had taken the chair by the side of the piano from which he could watch her profile in the candle-light, just as he had done in his grandmother's house. She sang a sad little song about the church at Eastnor, and then three of the 'Japanese Love Songs,' which, without being Japanese in the least, are quite pleasing.

At the end Oliver asked her to sing 'Abide With Me.'

Glances passed between several of the people present. This was quaintness . . . even originality. . . .

'Yes, do, please,' urged Sophy. 'I haven't heard it for years.'

'I thought it very beautiful,' Oliver explained.

'Well, if you don't mind,' said Margaret, with a little smile. 'It's very good, of course, but I don't usually sing it when I'm away from Northboro'.'

She needed no music.

The quiet strength of the old hymn touched the modern young people in spite of themselves. The thin gentleman was a little uncomfortable. The unforgiveable sin, in his philosophy, was sentimentality, and after all, 'Abide With Me'! . . . He had left 'creeds outworn' and all that kind of thing far, far behind as most modern young gentlemen do. It was all very well for rustics in quiet country churches, where nothing

ever changed, but here, in London, in the twentieth century. . . . And yet in Liddle's music and in the sedative optimism of the words was a serenity, a beauty which was almost physical.

'Thank you very much,' said Oliver when Margaret had made an end. She was sitting, hands resting on the piano, just as she had done in Northboro'.

'It's a beautiful old hymn,' said Sophy. . . . 'It makes me wonder, too. . . .'

'You should read Henley's answer to it . . . it's almost as fine, and I think more imbued with the modern spirit.' This from the thin gentleman behind the glistening glasses.

'I sometimes think that I don't want answers to some things,' said Sophy, and her wistful words were followed by a little silence.

'That is the result of centuries of faith,' said the thin gentleman, who apparently insisted on all things being answered. 'It has become instinctive to flinch from realities, and we have learnt to call the instinct faith. Instinct, as the scientists have demonstrated, is merely inherited custom.'

'That all sounds very clever,' said Sophy. 'But there is a simplicity about Margaret's hymn—it seems to me to belong to her to-night—which appeals to me very much more.'

The thin gentleman shrugged his shoulders good-humouredly and smiled behind glinting glasses. 'Faith lingers with women,' were his unspoken words. On the whole, he thought, it was just as well, which shows that he was a very superior young man indeed.

It is an odd thought, but almost all superior people are thin. Perhaps the scientific gentlemen are able to explain that also.

At the parting Oliver wanted the girls to visit him

at his studio, and on the Thursday following Margaret and Sophy did so. Gladys was unable to come. They had eagerly accepted the invitation because it meant—quite apart from their interest in Oliver—an insight into that tiny world of painters which maintains a corporate whole in London, in spite of the absorbing jealousy of the great city.

Oliver's char-lady was spurred to hitherto undreamed-of activities. She was reinforced for the purpose with a mysterious Mrs Sprawl, whose hair made a nob no larger than a walnut at the back of her head. She sniffed maddeningly, in a melancholy, hopeless manner; but if her manners were rudimentary, she possessed a veritable hatred of what she called 'muck.' She departed, taking her sniff with her along the passage, and leaving behind a smell of yellow soap and a cleanliness which is not natural in a Chelsea studio.

Oliver dissipated the pungent odour of the soap by judiciously dropping turpentine on the carpets. The resultant smell was not displeasing, although he was a little anxious about it.

Mrs Scott had provided an excellent tea, and when the supreme moment came of ushering in the girls, she had evolved into an unknown creature of black frock and white apron, wholly unlike the chrysalis char-lady of normal times.

They went round the studio with the artist, who talked much more freely than he usually did. Just before tea Trollope came in.

His fondness for little cakes provided an absorbing topic of conversation, and when the meal was over he took the others round to his own studio where the lay figure and unfinished sketches (Trollope had more unfinished sketches lying around than any other two men in London) proved almost as exciting as his finished pictures.

Margaret was greatly interested in the studios and examined them in great detail, shooting eager questions at the painters, who were amused at her obvious desire for 'copy' . . . the studios to them were merely the rooms in which they worked, and were devoid of all romantic associations.

But suddenly Margaret's stream of questions came to an end; she remained standing in silence before the picture of a girl's head . . . a girl strangely like herself, with the same quiet colouring.

The silence following question after rapid question was startling, and the three who watched her saw that the picture had greatly agitated Margaret. A strange look flashed into Trollope's eyes, wavered, and remained there—a look which might have been fear. When Margaret turned sharply from the picture—her attitude conveyed the impression that she had suddenly made up her mind definitely—each of the three who watched her was conscious that something had affected her deeply.

When she spoke her voice was controlled and calm, but in the cold light from the north window, they saw that her face had become very white.

'Who is this, Mr Trollope?' she asked.

Trollope's eyes were on her face and met hers unflinchingly. Oliver and Sophy were conscious of an 'atmosphere' which had suddenly and startlingly come into the studio, and conscious also that they had no part in it.

'It was a girl I knew years ago,' the old painter said. 'A dear friend of mine,' he added, after a pause.

'What was her name?' A sharp, almost staccato note had come into her voice.

'Lilla,' he said . . . 'It has distressed you . . .' his words died away into silence and he remained gazing at the girl's white face.

'You knew her?' Trollope's question was unnecessary. Quite obviously Margaret had recognised the face.

'I believe she was my mother.' The words were husky; Margaret was standing motionless, her hand on her heart.

'Look,' she said, and her eyes were unwaveringly on the old painter. As they watched she drew from her bosom a locket—the locket which Philippa had found around her neck in the *crèche* all those long years ago.

Trollope took the locket and examined it gravely. Like Margaret, he strove to be calm.

'Yes,' he said. 'That was Lilla. I remember her as if it were yesterday. . . . She was my model. She came from somewhere in the Midlands. I loved her . . . she is the only woman I ever loved.'

'Yes . . . yes,' Margaret urged. Tiny spots of colour had come to her cheeks.

'She did not love . . . me,' Trollope went on.

'She would have married me, but for him, my brother. They disappeared. David died two years later in Paris . . . absinthe. . . . Before he died . . . he told me about . . . you. He wasn't certain. He had deserted her . . . for all he knew she was starving. I haunted the places where she used to go, but she never came back . . . never came to me . . . never. I would have forgiven all . . . if she had come back. They went away the night before she was to have married me . . . and now you come, like a ghost from the past . . . Lilla's daughter.'

Something which had held Margaret together snapped, and she sank into a chair. She was breathing quickly. It was almost too sudden for her to appreciate what she had heard. No one knew what to do, and they waited for intolerable seconds, when Trollope crossed to her side and placed his hand on her shoulder.

'Poor little Margaret!' he said.

His words loosed the comforting tears and she wept. Presently she was calmer.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I was overwrought. One day I will tell you all I know about myself. It isn't much.'

'I might have known,' Trollope said. 'You have David's mouth and Lilla's eyes. . . . Lilla's daughter,' he added after a pause, as if the wonder of it staggered him.

Suddenly Margaret rose.

'I'm glad,' she said. 'I wanted to know about myself more than anything on earth.'

'I'm your uncle, you know,' Trollope said seriously. There was something half-pathetic, half-whimsical in the manner of his words which relieved the tension.

'I suppose you are,' she said wonderingly. 'I hadn't a relation in the world, you know.'

'Nor had I,' said the old painter.

The two men went back to Richmond with the girls, and on the way Trollope learnt the story of Margaret's discovery in the *crèche*.

He took her arm as they went over the bridge.

'You don't know how delighted I am,' she said. 'I have always felt that my mother was dead, and I believed myself utterly alone in the world.'

'I have always hoped that one day she would come, but the years went by. We must be good friends, Margaret, for her sake. Perhaps she knows, somewhere, that we have found each other.'

Oliver and Sophy joined them as they came to the flat and gradually the seriousness which had come to them with the strange discovery left them. Margaret kissed 'Uncle Trollope' when he left.

Oliver gave a 'rag' in honour of the new relationship

some days later. Anthony Muirhead and his wife were there, Sankey, slightly inebriated and very poetical, Ronald Hutton, who wore Chinese dress in honour of the host, who critically pointed out that it formed the equivalent of a top hat and brown boots in English attire. Dulcie, his fiancée, who came in a mad evening frock of emerald green, and a dozen others of the people who are always found at Chelsea rags.

Sankey, elevated by an excellent meal to abnormal spirits, proposed the health of the evening in a brilliant little speech which, by general assertion, was much too clever, even for Sankey drunk, to be impromptu. Trollope replied, and every one listened to him as to an oracle, for Chelsea loved him.

Afterwards there was dancing. . . .

Barry Muirhead played ragtime for a while, and when she tired they danced to the gramophone.

It was not until nearly the end of the evening that Oliver danced, and then only because Dulcie Whittingham would no longer tolerate his refusal.

'You *can* dance,' she insisted, and whirled him away into the throng.

'That's splendid . . . let yourself go a tiny bit . . . you're just a little bit stiff. . . .'

'There! I told you so,' she said exultantly at the end. 'You came through splendidly. It's sheer laziness which stops you, my lad.'

Oliver laughed. It really was quite good fun.

'It would be difficult *not* to dance with you as a partner,' he said.

They danced the next dance together.

The music was slower and, as on the previous occasion they had danced together, she was more definitely in his arms. He could feel her heart close to him; her hand held his tightly. . . . He had never been so utterly *conscious* of a woman in his life. Her eyes

were nearly closed, and he had a tantalising feeling that the brown eyes behind the narrowed eyelids were smiling. He could just make out the flecks of red in them. . . . Suddenly her eyes opened and met his waiting eyes. The look in them startled him . . . he was conscious of a queer, unsettling thrill, and with an effort he broke the spell which held his eyes on hers.

'You dance . . . divinely,' she said softly, so softly that he only just heard the whispered words. 'I could dance always with you.' And he knew that she meant something quite different from the words she uttered.

'Do you mind if we stop?' he asked sharply. 'I am . . . a little giddy.' She remembered that he had once before used the phrase.

'Sure!' she said, and with her hand still on his arm she led him to a chesterfield.

'It passes . . . that giddiness,' she said with a little laugh. 'Once you have danced even a little more, you will not notice it.'

He saw that the lapel of his coat was soiled with the powder from her cheek and he wiped it off.

Again she smiled up into his eyes and again, uneasily, he turned away to find Margaret Halliday watching him. Her eyes dropped at once. . . . It was all wrong . . . everything. He wanted wildly to explain to Margaret. . . .

'She's really quite charming, that little country cousin of yours,' Dulcie was saying. 'Isn't it romantic discovering an uncle suddenly?'

'Yes. I think it is very romantic,' Oliver replied.

He noticed that there was powder, too, on his sleeve, where her white arm had rested.

That also he brushed off.

The evening broke up much earlier than usual, for Margaret and Sophy had to get to distant Richmond. Darnell and Trollope went with them to the station;

Oliver, greatly to his disappointment, walked through the silent Chelsea streets with Sophy. The old painter was a little ahead with Margaret, whose arm was in his. . . . They were sufficiently near for Oliver to know that they walked almost in silence. And there was so much that he wanted to explain to Margaret. To-night he could have talked to her, all his life he had been sparing of words, even as Luen-chi was. But to-night he would have talked, and Margaret was six yards ahead of him with Trollope, silent and confident.

The dull tube station swallowed up the girls, and the two men turned back into the quiet streets together. There was a brooding gravity about Trollope.

'Already Lilla's daughter seems mine,' he said. 'I think I shall take a house in St John's Wood . . . she would like it, I think.'

'She will live with you?' Oliver asked.

'I hope so . . . we are all each other has in the world. Strange the power of blood, Darnell. But she is more to me than my brother's child. She is Lilla's. . . .'

They parted at the end of Trollope's road, and Oliver walked very slowly back to his own studio. He let himself in wearily.

All the evening he had wanted to think, to adjust things in his mind. From the turmoil of his thoughts one fact evolved: he loved Margaret, he loved her so that without her, life and work had lost their savour. He loved her as only a man can love who has never loved a woman before.

How long he remained sitting alone he did not know, but he was awakened from his reverie by a knock at his door. A frown crossed his face; the last thing he wished for was an interruption at that moment. The knock was repeated; it was louder. He crossed to the door and unlocked it. Standing in the dim light of

the doorway he saw Dulcie Whittingham, who had left the studio, half an hour ago at least, with Hutton.

'I left my bag here,' she said. 'I'm most awfully sorry if I'm disturbing you, but I felt so absurdly awake that I thought I would slip across. . . .'

'Come in,' said Oliver, with as much civility as he could muster.

They had some little difficulty in finding it, but at length did so behind the chair on which she had been sitting.

'I'm glad I found it,' she said with a laugh. 'I'm also glad you're still up. . . . Give me a cigarette and then I will toddle along back to my studio. The night is positively gorgeous. . . . I never before appreciated so much the meaning of the phrase, "sentinel stars" . . . Campbell, isn't it?'

'I don't know,' said Oliver, who was getting a cigarette.

He held a match for her, and when her cigarette was lit she sank into the chair he had vacated when her knock had disturbed him.

Oliver remained silent. The thoughts which had surged up from his soul were for Margaret. For the girl who sat in the low chair there, looking up to him with amused, questioning eyes, he had nothing.

'Do be pally, and sit down,' she urged. 'You seem like the outraged personification of suburban respectability standing up there. . . . I had never noticed before, Oliver, how tall you were.' She had never called him by his Christian name previously, but she did it so naturally that he hardly noticed it.

'I am sorry . . .' he commenced.

'Rot! Sit down!' she commanded. 'What harm is there in my coming back here for my poor little bag?'

'Oh, none, none!' he said, and sat down even as she had wished.

'That's better,' she said, with the quiet little mocking laugh he did not understand.

'I suppose it's a very old trick, leaving one's bag if one wishes to return,' she said, after a silence.

He looked at her.

'Oh, don't stare at me, Oliver, as if you were a child of seven!' she burst out.

'I am sorry!' he said again.

'Poor old Oliver!' she said, with a little shrug of her white shoulders. 'You always seem to be apologising for something. It's a mistake. Personally, I'm never sorry!'

'No?' he asked.

'No,' she replied. 'I believe that I was sent into the world, was given life, that I should enjoy life. I do, Oliver. I enjoy it thoroughly.'

'But where is Ronny?' he asked helplessly.

'Ronny!' she laughed. 'He's probably in bed and asleep in his absurd studio.'

'I don't think that he would like your being here.'

'I don't suppose he would for a minute,' she said calmly. 'The male is always egotistical . . . it is the old Adam. One of the things about you which fascinates me is just the utter lack of that strident egoism which characterises nearly all the *ordinary* Englishmen I know. It's feminine in a way, but all great artists have much of the feminine in them, although, paradoxically, very few women seem to have anything of the artist.'

'Then why do you come here if Ronny does not like it?'

'My dear man, don't be infantile. I'm a free agent, just as Ronny is. When I became engaged to him I insisted that I should do whatever I wished to. Whatever I became engaged to him for, I can't think. I must have been absent-minded, or something.'

'I think that your flippancy is very wrong!' he said.

'Don't be a prig, Oliver . . . it's too abominably English for words.'

'But you are engaged to Hutton. . . .'

'That's quite true. If he objects to my coming here, if I wish to, it will be a simple matter to break off my engagement. But I didn't come here to argue, Oliver, really, I didn't. He doesn't know, no one knows, excepting just you and me. I think there's always something very delicious about a secret shared by two.'

'But there is *no* secret,' insisted Oliver. 'There *is* nothing to hide!'

'Don't be crude, Oliver. The subtle part of your brain isn't working to-night. I am here; you and I in all the world alone know it. Every one is certain that I am in my own studio . . . excepting we two . . . there's nothing sinister about it, I grant you that. But there *is* something secret, something delicious. You are ungallant to suggest that it is otherwise, ungallant not to appreciate at once the shade of my thought . . . I know most men couldn't; you can.'

'I will walk with you to your studio,' said Oliver.
'The streets are lonely.'

'The streets are full of magic moonlight. See!' She turned to the wall at her side and switched off the one light Oliver had left burning. The blue electric moonlight streamed into the room through the big north window, touching the walls and the pictures and the man and girl to a silver wonder.

'Isn't it beautiful?' he heard her whisper.

She was leaning forward in her low chair; the silver of the moon seemed to be dancing round her glorious hair; his eyes evaded hers in vain.

'Oliver!' she whispered. 'Oliver!'

The moonlight was in his brain . . . the dancing, fluttering light!

He saw her arms held a little upward to him . . . beseeching, calling. . . .

'Oliver!' the husky whisper came again, soft as the silvery light itself. It broke into his brain as a lonely cry will shake the silence of a dark wood. He sank on his knees by her side, all the world forgotten in the glamour and passion of her glance, in the wild clinging of her white arms. She drew him down to her, kissing him on the eyes and mouth . . . closing her eyes as she felt his hot, answering kiss.

In the moonlight she looked at him, holding him a little away from her. He saw the smile in her eyes. In that queer light his deep brown eyes were black. As she looked she felt him shiver, and then she knew that he had risen, was standing above her. His face was still clear in the moonlight . . . it was changing.

'Oliver!' she called in fear. 'Oliver . . .'

Something was creeping into his face, changing it. The eyes had narrowed, the cheeks were drawn, there were a hundred tiny differences . . . it was not an English face which looked down at her, its coldness was appalling, terrifying.

'Go away!' he said, and there was that in his voice which had to be obeyed.

He heard the door close behind her and her steps died away at once in the passage outside.

Alone in the studio he switched on the light again, shutting out the hateful moonlight, and on the table, still, was the bag she had come to fetch.

CHAPTER XIV

A SKETCH IS TORN UP

ON his way to and from the flat near Richmond Bridge Oliver often watched the boats on the river and those who, with varying success, controlled them. He believed that the knowledge he had picked up of the native craft on the river near his respected grandfather's estate would enable him to manage most of the boats he had seen on the bosom of Old Thames, at any rate as well as the majority of them were usually managed.

A chance remark dropped by Margaret as they were standing on the balcony of the flat watching the crowded river below them, had given him the idea.

'I much prefer a punt,' she said. 'It seems to me to be the last word in sheer comfort, laziness raised to an art.'

The upshot was an interview between Darnell and a garrulous, plausible, and enormously confident young man named Job Baker, but who was known to most people on the waterside as 'Moppitup.'

'Yessir,' Moppitup said. 'There's no man on the waterside as can teach puntin' like me. . . . I've learnt most of the gents wot come down from town. I'm learnin' one now, a nactor, sir . . . gets his photo in the papers. "I'm very grateful to yer, Baker," he said to me after his six lessons . . . and all I charge is a thick 'un . . . a quid,' he added in polite explanation.

'That will do,' said Oliver. 'I will be here in the afternoon at two-thirty.' *

'Yessir!'

And the next afternoon at two-thirty Oliver was there.

He sat down whilst his teacher punted across stream.

'Yer notice, I'm steerin' with the pole?' Moppitup asked.

'Of course,' said Oliver.

Moppitup demonstrated how to drop in the pole, how to push, how to recover the pole, and how to keep the punt straight . . . the idea being to confuse the novice with overmuch knowledge.

'I will try,' said Oliver.

Moppitup hid a delighted smile and handed the pole to his pupil.

'Not bad, not at all bad, sir,' he said a little later, when he had watched Oliver's efforts.

'In China we used a long, light cane as a pole,' Oliver volunteered.

'You *'ave* punted before, then? I thought so.'

'In China, in the Chinese way. This is easier, I think.'

Meanwhile, Oliver was punting with comparative ease.

'Don't be frightened of the pole, sir!' Criticism, even of a vague kind, was essential at the moment to the teacher's self-respect.

At the end of half an hour Oliver was controlling the punt quite as well as most of punters who were on the river.

At the end of the second lesson he was a punter, or at least so Moppitup assured him. The thick 'un changed hands and Oliver was established for all time in his teacher's mind as a gent. It was apparently easy to do business with Oliver, and Moppitup always endeavoured to make his hay in the sunshine.

'You ought to *'ave* a punt of your own for the season, sir,' he suggested, with calculated casualness. 'Most

gents do; it's only the trippers what 'ires by the day. It's cheaper, too. I've got a new punt out in the water. Me'ogany and new poles. One o' the smartest craft on the river. . . . I'd let *you* 'ave it for ten quid for the rest of the season, seein' as 'ow I've taught yer. It ud be an ad for me. An' this is an age of advertisement.'

'I don't know about that,' said Oliver. 'I should only use it occasionally.'

'But she'd be always ready when yer *did* want 'er. Yer might turn up 'ere, with a lady, say, and there'd be no punt anywhere . . . besides, a gent like you don't want to hang about with a lot of trippers waitin', it stands to reason.'

Oliver was diffident, but in the end Moppitup wore him down with sheer, overwhelming argument, and for the rest of the season the artist was the possessor of a brand new 'me'ogany' punt.

He retailed his adventures to Margaret the following Sunday, and she agreed to spend the afternoon of the next day on the river with him.

By Monday afternoon Old Thames at Richmond has recovered to a great extent from the Sabbath crowd which surges down to it from the inner suburbs. Gone, spirited away to moorings behind Eel Pie Island are those 'pleasure' steamers which seem, even at the calamitous week-ends, to have no part in the spirit of the mighty river, to exist only for the crowd which the motor-buses and railways bring down. Along the banks are still unsavoury traces of the London exodus, masses of paper and orange peel, which demonstrate that if the crowd has no soul, as the clever French psychologist asserts, it, at least, has a stomach. But the crowd itself has gone, dissipated into the vague city, and until the buses commence to disgorge it again at another week-end there is quiet and beauty on the old river.

Half an hour before he was due to call at the flat, Oliver was at the steps below the bridge, anxiously supervising the efforts of 'Moppitup,' who was getting the punt ready.

'You'll be wantin' dollies,' the waterman asserted, thirstily wiping imaginary perspiration from his unheated brow.

'Dollies?' asked Oliver, greatly mystified.

'Yes. Cushions. Dolly-cushions. I've got some, of course, but they ain't usually included in a punt. The trippers 'as 'em, and so they've been a bit mucked abart. You can get some at Gosling's in the town. . . . It's just up the steps above the bridge.'

'I will,' said Oliver.

A very pretty girl in the big shop sold them to him. She was greatly helpful, suggesting colours to him. 'I *personally* like contrasting colours on the water,' she said. An enormous experience of the river was implied in her manner. She pointed out colours which contrasted. They did . . . horribly, and Oliver said 'No' . . . gently, lest her feelings should be hurt. In the end he purchased some dainty, old rose-coloured cushions which, as he knew, would blend with the big punt-cushions. It was a pity, the pretty girl thought, that so good-looking a young man should have such *ordinary* taste. . . .

'Where can I get tea up-stream?' Oliver asked Moppitup when he had deposited the new cushions in the punt.

'Can't do better than at the 'otel, sir, on th' balcony. . . .'

Moppitup having been tipped with half a crown (on which he spat with startling accuracy) Oliver set out to find Margaret.

She was dressed in a slip of a white frock, and, as it happened, a sports coat and hat of the same colour

as the new cushions. Oliver, to whom colour naturally was of great importance, regarded it as a most excellent beginning.

'I say, I like you in flannels, Oliver,' she said frankly. 'You look most awfully distinguished.'

'It is very good of you. I am not quite certain what you mean, but I'm sure it's flattering. . . . I will not return the compliment, however, it is unnecessary. . . .'

'That means you like my hat?'

'Rather!'

'Troll chose it. . . .'

'Not for nothing is he an artist,' Darnell commented.

'He's a *dear*,' she replied.

Excepting for the swarms of boats and punts moored near by which awaited, like uneasy ghosts, the return of the week-end crowd, there were not more than half a dozen boats to be seen on the river as they walked over the bridge,

With Moppitup hovering around, Margaret settled herself amid the cushions, and, with tactful and unobtrusive assistance from the waterman, Oliver pushed off. He passed between the two groups of boats moored in mid-stream above the bridge without mishap, and afterwards the punting was simple.

'You're a most extraordinary man,' she said, looking up at him.

'So? But why?'

'You've picked up the punting business in a day or so. Most men spend half the season before they reach your efficiency.'

'But I *wanted* to learn,' he said simply.

She noticed that several people—particularly the girls—in passing boats glanced at him. It was a pleasing feeling. It really was nice to have a man with such a striking appearance with one. The day would come, she pondered, when people would recognise

him as the great artist, and as he passed, one would hear them say. 'That's Oliver Darnell . . . yes, *the* Darnell. . . .' It would certainly be pleasant.

It was sedative to lie there whilst he punted, letting one's thoughts just drift along . . . quietly, like the gray green water.

In all the world there is no place like Old Thames for loosening thought, for tinting it with a faint rose colour. It is a dangerous old river, full of ancient wisdom. Margaret noticed, where his shirt was undone at the neck, the line where the deep brown of his face and the lighter brown of his body met. She wondered why he was always so serious, so . . . preoccupied. Bobby Morden would have inveigled her by this time into an unending, flippant discussion on some matter or other, tremendously inessential. But Oliver was grave, thoughtful. Was the man always thinking? What did he think about?

'A penny for your thoughts, Oliver,' she said suddenly.

'I . . . I was thinking that this little island just ahead is very beautiful. . . . The green of the vegetation is quite different from the green of my country . . . it is not so vivid, I think, calmer, cooler.'

She was consciously disappointed.

'You don't seem ever to get very far away from your art, Oliver. It must be very, very important to you. You don't know how lucky you artists are to have an absorbing interest in your life, an interest which is almost a passion. I don't think artists should ever marry . . . they are so closely devoted to their work that it doesn't give the woman a chance. I told Uncle Trollope so yesterday. The old cynic only laughed.'

'So you think he's cynical?'

'Not really. He's as sentimental as a school-girl at bottom.'

They were passing between Glover's Island and the lush, dank vegetation on the Middlesex side; the bitter, sub-acid smell of water plants impregnated the river, giving a pleasantly refreshing tang to the air. Up-stream they could see a big house-boat standing out whitely from its background of green. Immediately above the island a white ship was moored, and beyond it was the mass of trees which makes the Richmond reach the most beautiful of the lower reaches of the river.

Hammerton's—at the time flushed with recent victory in a matter of river-law—was passed.

'Aren't you tired?' she asked.

'No, Margaret. I like punting you.'

'I most certainly like being punted.'

It really was a pity he didn't talk more, she thought.

Came a crumbling, ornate boat-house on the Middlesex side; it was worn-out and obsolete, yet retained a glamour, a suggestion of the romance of the age and dynasty to which it had once belonged. There was something infinitely sad in that ghost of the imperialism of another race.

Margaret told her companion its story.

'Those exiled princes might easily have walked along that very bank,' she said, 'thinking their sad thoughts . . . and their France so far away, so remote.'

'You are sorry for people with sad thoughts?'

'Of course I am,' she said. 'But how doleful we are getting. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves on such a lovely day.'

They moored under the lower end of the island at the point where a ledge of gravel comes out into the river, and there they remained until tea-time, chatting idly of pictures and men, the flies on the water, the green haze of the trees and the hundred and one things

which Old Thames suggests to the faithful few who seek him out in his contemplative moments, when London and London's millions might be a thousand miles away.

They had tea on the balcony of the hotel, even as Moppitup had suggested. From their table they could look across the fields to where Ham and Petersham were repudiating their contiguity with London, and where, in the distance, Kingston might have been a country town instead of a suburb. In the foreground were cows . . . red and white.

'I think cows are better in the fields than in pictures,' Oliver said. 'I entered a sale-room in town the other day where they sold pictures. It was very sad. One, I remember, was described as a "cattle subject." I thought it strange.'

'That is Victorian, I think—the phrase, I mean. I understand that they used to buy pictures by the yard in those days. Still, we are improving, Oliver.'

So they chatted.

Afterwards they went up-stream, through the lock to Teddington backwater, in the cool greenness of which they remained whilst the afternoon heat died away. Margaret paddled through the backwater before they started back, and Oliver watched her from his end of the punt, watched the sun coming through the trees to her hair and face and arms, watched the easy motion of her body as it swung with the paddle, and the quiet, ever-widening circles in the calm, dark water. After they had turned into the main stream at the end of the backwater she continued to paddle, and in the lulling sound of the water at the side of the punt, one of the most exquisite sounds in the world, Oliver achieved a calm, a repose which he had not known since the alien world of London had engulfed him.

They passed little bungalows, from several of which people were bathing, and Margaret was turning towards the Surrey shore when he sat up.

'I'll punt now, if you like,' he said.

'Right-o !'

He helped her back to her seat and resumed his old position at the end of the punt.

Below the lock the tide had turned and was going down fast. He had merely to steer the punt. . . . In the soft light of the early evening Margaret was very beautiful indeed. Another girl flashed into his mind, a girl wholly unlike her. Affirmative, strident, for all her subtlety, Dulcie was infinitely crude in his thoughts, a creature of garish, dangerous colouring, uneasy, unsatisfied. He thrust her from his mind angrily; she was utterly antagonistic to that sedative evening, utterly different from the calm, dignified girl whose hand was trailing in the water at the side of the punt.

He suggested supper as they came to the Island Hotel.

'Thanks very much, but the girls will be waiting for me. . . . I was told to ask you as well.'

'That's very nice of all of you.'

The shadows were creeping out across the water as the punt slipped past the end of the island; the sun touched the evening to a mellow gold as it went down over the gray church and the deceptive red roofs of Twickenham—deceptive, since the old houses which throng the waterside there are a mere shell of antiquity, hiding rows of modern ones.

The river had become more silent, more mysterious.

Here and there on the banks stray couples passed in the twilight, and in the few boats coming up-stream or moored against the banks they saw, or sensed, other couples. A fish leaped from the water a yard or so from the punt and the splash made them doubly

conscious of the stillness of the evening it had interrupted.

They spoke very little; the calm beauty of the evening sufficed.

At Glover's Island he took the way off the boat as Moppitup had taught him.

'Would you mind if I tied up, Margaret, for a few minutes? I want to talk to you.'

'It's past seven, you know, Oliver. I wouldn't mind, only the girls will be waiting.' She had known at once, as women do, what was in his thoughts.

'I promise for a few minutes, for five minutes only!' he urged.

'Well, just for five minutes.' She sat up, wide awake, the magic of the evening gone.

He tied the punt to a staple in one of the planks encircling the Island, and sat opposite to her . . . gravely.

'Margaret, I'm very sorry, but I haven't kept the promise I made to you at Northboro'!'

'About your work, you mean?'

He nodded.

'I did my best, but my work was stilted . . . hopeless.'

'I'm very sorry, Oliver, very sorry indeed.'

'I simply *can't*, in London . . . without you.'

'But, Oliver, this isn't fair. I've done nothing ever to lead you to think . . .'

'I know you haven't. When I asked you before, you said that I might ask you again in a year, but I cannot wait, Margaret. I hate London . . . I want to get away from it. Come with me! Come back to China, to Japan. We could live at Toyama . . . Sansi would love you . . . we could stay in Luen-chi's garden . . . I will show you wonderful cities . . . beauty and colour. Together we will have everything

which life can give us . . .' His words died away. He had been speaking with a strange passion. But now, suddenly, he was silent, his eyes on her face. . . .

'I'm sorry, Oliver. You put me in a horrible position. I do like you, I admire you . . . but I can't marry you. I don't know why, but while I feel as I do now I can't marry you. I hate hurting you . . . you are such a child ! It sounds horrid, that, but you know I don't mean it to.'

'Is it because I'm not . . . altogether English?' he asked quietly. 'You said before that it wasn't,' he added.

'I don't know. I think it is. You are so strange at times.'

'You may change,' he urged. 'These things are nearly all prejudice. . . .'

'But I'm English,' she cried.

'And so am I in everything that matters,' he insisted. 'I will stay here in England if you prefer it. If you were with me it wouldn't matter.'

'Oliver, you must understand. I like you as my friend enormously, but I simply cannot *think* of you as anything else. It isn't prejudice, it's instinct.'

'But white girls marry . . . men of other races.'

'I know. I'm only speaking for myself.'

'But you may change,' he insisted again.

She shook her head sadly.

'I'm sorry Oliver, . . .' she said with a poor little smile which showed her feelings more than any words could have done.

'I shall not give up hope, though, Margaret,' he said, and his words were a reply to the smile. 'Not until you choose another man.'

'But, anyway, Oliver, we *must* be getting down now. It'll be after eight before we get in as it is. . . . It's a shame to keep them waiting, they're such dear girls.'

'Yes. . . . I must untie the punt.'

This he did in silence, and in silence commenced to punt down-stream.

In the gathering dusk she watched his tall figure, and her woman's soul was filled with pity for him. There was something simple, naïve, something essentially childlike and yet poignant in him which appealed to her womanhood, to its weakest and most responsive side. And yet, behind it all, behind the pity, was that consciousness of physical repulsion whenever she considered Oliver as a husband. Often she had thought this matter out. She knew that in modern marriage the physical side is, after all, only a tiny part, that, if she wished, the marriage would be one in name only. But deep down in her she knew that the dissatisfaction with her life in Northboro', the desire which had come to her there for change and novelty, were expressions of the still deeper eternal desire of her sex. She had hated to be controlled by so primitive, so *universal* an instinct, and sometimes she had thought of Oliver as an escape from it. With him, as he had passionately urged, she could see the wonderful world. Other women, she knew, had sacrificed their primitive desires for less . . . and some, she knew, seemed to be happy. But Margaret could not make the sacrifice. The babies which would one day be, clutched at her heart-strings with invisible, irresistible fingers . . . and the man at the end of the punt was as naught. She knew that if she and Oliver had a baby, it might quite easily be wholly Chinese in appearance and in soul.

She shivered.

'You are cold, Margaret?' he asked. 'I will hurry.'

'No . . . no,' she said, waking from her reverie. 'But it is a little chilly.'

She looked up at him, ashamed of her silence. In the dim, half-light she saw his face. The mouth was

firm; there was an impassiveness about it she had never noticed before. Pain had brought the hidden part of him, the soul . . . Sansi . . . to the surface. His emotion was hidden . . . and the mask behind which he sheltered was not the stolidness of the Englishman, but that impenetrable reserve of Luen-chi and his ancestors, a reserve which torture itself cannot break.

The look she saw on his face startled her, shocked her, and with the amazing intelligence of a woman whose emotions have been played on, she understood; the pity which surged up in her carried her to the point of tears.

They rounded the bend below Glover's Island. For both of them the enchantment of the night was already dissipated. Had it not been so, the lighted motor-buses passing over the bridge ahead of them would have destroyed it, as they have done for many happier couples on many enchanted nights.

Moppitup awaited them at the steps and gave the same discreetly unobtrusive assistance in bringing the punt alongside. Oliver helped Margaret with a tender solemnness which touched her, and, without thought, tipped Moppitup again.

The boatman had already liquefied the former half-crown, and in those days a half-crown commanded a great deal of beer.

He winked as he pocketed the second half-crown, winked at Oliver, whose eyes met his unwaveringly, almost unseeingly.

With Moppitup a wink had but one meaning when he was approaching the point of saturation; it is a sinister, unpleasant meaning. He knew Old Thames . . . and his wink was usually not far away from truth, but, from Oliver's face, he saw that for once he was very wrong indeed.

He turned and watched the man and girl go under the bridge and turn up the steps.

"E's a rum 'un," soliloquised the boatman. Whatever it was he had seen in Oliver's face had almost sobered him.

But he had now a second half-crown.

Oliver and the girl who wouldn't marry him passed on over the bridge. Now that the solitude of the river had been left behind he made a great effort to shake off the black mood which had seized him, and he spoke almost casually of the trees silhouetted in the sunset. She knew what the effort must have cost him.

Sophy opened the door for them at the flat.

"You bad children!" she said. "We're tired of waiting."

"But it's been such a lovely evening," Margaret said. "It seemed a shame to come in." Kindlier lie was never more naturally told.

"A gentleman called Morden has called for you," Sophy said. "I asked him to wait, but he said that he would return later."

"Bobby Morden. . . . Yes, he's an old friend of mine in Northboro'. I didn't even know he was in town."

"Well, run in, dear. I'll serve supper. Come in, Mr Darnell. . . ."

Sophy was in a managing mood; all good women have them.

Oliver was the only visitor at supper, and during the meal Margaret talked a great deal about nothing in particular. There was a faint flush on her cheeks, but not so faint that it escaped the notice of the two other girls. They wondered, and jumped to the wrong conclusion. Oliver divined the reason, appreciating the brave kindness of the girl.

Afterwards Bobby Morden came.

He was dressed, as he always was, safely. Blue serge suit, black tie, and reproachless straw hat constituted a uniform which had the one great virtue of all uniforms—it admitted no possibility of bad taste, since taste itself was eliminated; he was what is known as 'quietly dressed in good taste.' Each of the four other people in the room would have unhesitatingly described him as good-looking . . . a most expressive description, and one which, like many other old English words, is losing its original meaning. He was clean-shaven, and his dark hair was brushed well back from his forehead; his skin was as clear as a girl's. He wore no jewellery whatever. His clean-cut face and the definite poise of his body spoke of a consciousness of that correctness in detail which is the very least that can be expected from a young Englishman with an education as expensive as his. His manner was confident but there was no arrogance about him whatever.

'I'm afraid I'm intruding,' he said, after he had been introduced to the girls and had greeted Darnell.

Reassuring remarks were murmured.

'We're just going to have coffee!' Sophy volunteered.
'You're *quite* sure you've had a meal?'

'Oh, quite, thanks!'

'And what's brought you to town, Bobby?' Margaret asked.

'I'm *in* town, now,' he said.

'Really?'

'Yes. I'm the pater's agent in town. Rather smart move, what?'

'It's certainly better than Northboro,' Margaret agreed.

'It *is* rather a hole, isn't it?'

'The strange part about it is that Oliver liked it.'

'It was quite new to me,' Oliver put in. 'It has a gaunt beauty of its own, I think. . . .'

'Still, I think Margaret and I have seen too much of it, Darnell.'

The 'Margaret and I' sent Oliver back to silence.

After coffee they made music, which Bobby supervised.

He possessed a pleasant tenor voice, and Darnell was conscious that the songs he sang were meant for Margaret, acutely conscious of it.

Margaret asked Oliver once if there were any songs he would like her to sing . . . but he liked all her songs, he said.

Morden was quite at his ease with Oliver; the jealousy which on one occasion at least had been obvious at Northboro' even to Oliver, was entirely absent, and, when the latter rose to go, Morden did the same. There was no opportunity for either to say anything to Margaret alone, and they left the flat together. Their way lay over the bridge.

'It's a ripping night, Darnell,' Bobby remarked.

'Yes. There's a quality, a warm blue about the air which is very fine.'

'It's rather lucky, my getting up to town now that Margaret's here,' Bobby said.

'Yes.'

'I'm staying at one of the hotels on the Terrace . . . ripping situation. It's very much more countrified than Northboro', although we lived just outside the town. My room here overlooks the river valley. It's really fine in the morning.'

'It would be . . . '

'There was an artist Johnny used to live up there, Reynolds his name was. Frightfully famous, I believe.'

'He was a great portrait painter. We have few portrait painters in my country.'

'You look on China, then, as your country, Darnell?'

'I was brought up there. . . .'

'Yes. I suppose you would, of course. I should like to see some of those old countries, China, Japan, India, and so on. One day I may take—go there, I mean. Margaret's very keen on travelling.'

'I believe she is.'

'Well, I turn up the hill here. I suppose you go on through the town?'

'Yes. Good-night, Morden,' said Oliver.

The two shook hands, and Oliver heard the other whistling for a little time after they had parted.

Richmond was almost deserted as he walked through it, and in the train he found the same depressing loneliness. He lit a cigarette and threw it, almost unsmoked, away.

Now that he was alone, and there remained no need for him to hold up a mask to the world, his thoughts were plainly reflected on his face. Even in the imperfect light of the train there was something about him which made the two other occupants of the long carriage glance curiously at him from time to time.

The whole affair seemed to him to be grotesquely unfair. He had never had a chance in his effort to win Margaret; he had been disqualified even before he saw her by the mixture of his blood. Even in his depressed condition there was sufficient of the egoist in him to be quite certain that had things been equal she would have chosen him. There was no trace of bitterness in his mind where Margaret was concerned; he understood.

But he was Richard Darnell's son, and it was this, perhaps, which prevented his giving up the quest of Margaret—even when he knew that it was hopeless. One of the great defects in our race is our inability to realise when we are beaten, and like most of our other defects, we have come to regard it as a virtue.

There was his work . . . but for days he had

scarcely given it a thought. If Margaret had been with him . . . but she was not. . . . He glanced incuriously at the station where the train had stopped. More people were getting in, and a man and a girl sat opposite to him. He watched the girl's eyes on the very ordinary young man's face. He saw the look in her eyes.

At last he came to his station.

Overhead the stars were coldly distant, and he walked through silent, echoing streets to his studio.

Never before had he been so acutely conscious of loneliness, never before had a room possessed such an unnerving quality of emptiness.

He sat a while gazing at the picture he had been vainly working on the day before, when a memory came back to him.

He turned to a little table, where he made a rapid, wonderful, charcoal sketch of Margaret. His long, tapering fingers worked at an astounding pace, without hesitancy or doubt. Into the face he drew he worked subtly the expression he had seen half an hour before in the face of the girl in the train, the girl who had looked into the eyes of the young man with her.

For a while he sat watching the face he had made; then he tore the sketch slowly into tiny pieces, and dropped them into the waste-paper basket.

CHAPTER XV

THE SOLACE OF SANKEY

HALF an hour after Oliver's breakfast was finished the following morning, Trollope came to his studio.

Oliver was working. He was dressed in a silk gown of black and gorgeous blue which Luen-chi had given to him before he went to Toyama.

'Good!' exclaimed Trollope from the doorway.
'Industrious youth!'

'I have been working since six o'clock.'

'Better and better. You will be an R.A., my boy, if you continue. It is, I understand, the reward of industry alone. A lot of paint, a still greater amount of industry, and you shall sit in judgment on the work of men who possess merely imagination. You will also play a creditable part in destroying the egotism which is unhappily always a part of genius. But what is this?'

'An old idea. . . . I learnt it at Toyama. You call it impressionism, I believe; it is the classic art of the East . . . here it is very modern. I felt like it this morning. I seemed to have slipped back to my boyhood in Toyama . . . '

'Back to your boyhood, oh, hoary one?'

'I have felt very old these last days, Trollope.'

'When you *are* old, Oliver, you will look back on these days and their disappointments without regret, and will be amused that you took them so seriously.'

'I do not think, my friend, that you can quite understand how a young man feels. . . . I think because you have never been old.'

Trollope laughed.

'That is a compliment, my dear Oliver. Unhappily, it is not true . . . but I don't insist on truth in compliments. There is something reluctant, grudging, in compliments which are merely true. The multiplication table is true, damnably so; a compliment should be the offspring of wit and imagination. But get on with your work. . . . I like it. Those hills, perhaps, just the least little bit in the world, too sombre . . . no, perhaps not. You must give an exhibition, Oliver; all young men do.'

'And you, you old sinner, should write a book.'

'A book? This is the unkindest cut of all. But about what?'

'"Legs, and How to Pull Them: A Complete Treatise, by David Trollope."

'An idea! An excellent idea. It would be regarded as a bone-setter's manual, though, I'm afraid. I'll toddle along now; I was just looking up Anthony Muirhead and dropped in as I passed. I never interrupt a man who is working.'

'But I would rather talk to you . . . or at least I would rather listen to you.'

'No, my dear Oliver, you are painting . . . in any case I have to go. I merely called in to have the pleasure of cursing you for not working.'

Oliver wondered a little at the old painter's manner. There was an uneasiness in it, a striving which was not in harmony with Trollope's character.

The two men's eyes met as they shook hands.

'I really *am* glad you are working,' Trollope said. 'In the long run work is the most important thing. . . .'

Trollope was much happier now that he had seen Oliver, as the 'phone message he had received that morning from Margaret had distressed him. She had asked him to look Oliver up at once, as she had thought

he was not well over night. Trollope was forbidden to mention that Margaret had anything to do with his visit, and had been unable to obtain any further information from her.

At the end of Oliver's road he found a public telephone, and from there he rang up the number which Margaret had given him. There was the usual delay, the usual series of groans and stray fragments of other people's conversation, before he obtained the number he wanted.

'Yes,' he said, when at last the ponderous machinery of the telephone service had brought Margaret within speaking distance. 'He seems quite all right. I did as you commanded, and talked cheerfully to him. He bore up wonderfully well under my attack of good spirits . . . fancy being *cheerful* at half-past ten in the morning! What's that? Oh, yes, when I left he was going back to his work. I am heartily ashamed of myself. Why? Why, because for your sweet sake I have joined the ranks of the old men who mean well.'

'What was he working on?' Margaret asked. 'And don't be silly, Troll. I'm very serious.'

'Rather a quaint picture. An impressionist landscape. He told me that it was the classic art of his country, that they've been painting pictures like it for centuries. It is most awfully modern, really, in London. I wish you would tell me what made you send me to see him.'

'Nothing, Troll. I was a little anxious about him.'

'What have you been doing to him?'

'Nothing, you old silly!'

'You should be careful, Margaret,' the old painter went on. 'He's not wholly of our race, and, what is more important, he is not of our temperament. And he is a very great artist.'

'I should like a chat with you to-day, Troll . . . about Oliver. Would you mind?'

'Surely not. Come to lunch. I'll meet you at the Cavour at half-past one. But Oliver's quite all right at the moment; he's painting better than he's been doing for weeks.'

But for once even wise old Trollope was wrong.

All was not well with Oliver.

Had Trollope but understood aright, he would have known that the reversion to the art of Oliver's boyhood was the outward, visible sign of an emotional disturbance, only possible in a nature capable of great exaltation and still greater despair.

Darnell had been working from an earlier hour even than he had said; from the moment, indeed, when the light rendered it possible. The night had brought no sleep to him, and in the hours before the dawn he had paced up and down his studio, a prey to a sense of injustice and powerlessness. In those hours the London outside, the vast, inchoate, merciless city of a little time before, was silent. The peculiar stillness of the early hours in London seemed to have filtered into the studio, not to be a part of it at all—but something external, something with a quality unmistakably evil.

And by Darnell's side, the figure of despair had paced, a gray invisible figure which kept in step with him, slowly, methodically. A self-pity, which was almost a loathing, as pity so often is, filled Oliver's soul with anguish. He imagined the whole world, in those chill hours of darkness, to be organised subtly against him.

He was what he was, and, as such, was damned.

No effort on his part could modify his fate. He was a pariah, an outcast . . . so the invisible figure had whispered. All drew their skirts aside as he . . . the half-caste . . . passed.

Even Margaret.

With all her gentleness she had turned away from

him, offering him . . . friendship; cold ashes, and prompted by pity.

Pity . . . the most damnable thing in the world . . . impossible between equals.

If she had hated him it had been better . . . anything had been better than the pity he had seen in her eyes.

Art was international. It mattered not whether an artist was black or white or yellow. Trollope had said it, or Airlee . . . or Luen-chi . . . kindly old Luen-chi, who had wept all those years ago the while he looked at Oliver in his garden.

The gray figure laughed silently. The artist and his art are very different.

But it was rarely that the figure laughed. Usually it whispered, as, cunningly and plausibly, it whispers to nearly all at least once in their lives.

Was it worth it? The endless striving. To what end was work now that Margaret had gone?

Outside the consciousness which is life, and which renders all this misery, all this injustice possible, was a forgetting . . . a sleep . . . sleep of all things the most utterly desirable in Oliver's eyes as he walked.

To forget all, to be as the writing a child has wiped from its slate with a wet sponge . . .

To forget Margaret even . . . no more to think of the blue eyes, and the pity in blue eyes.

Ah! But there the gray figure lied. . . . He would never forget Margaret. Never. He wanted desperately not to forget her . . .

Suddenly Oliver was calmer and his companion, who never forces his presence on one unduly, departed.

On a sudden impulse Oliver left the studio and walked slowly down to the river. He was amazingly awake, unconscious even of any physical tiredness. The water slipped by sluggishly, heavily, as though it were burdened. Ahead of him he discerned the vague outlines of a

barge moored somewhere in mid-stream. It was absurdly, pathetically remote; alone, even as he was alone. But as he looked, the outlines became more distinct; the sky was faint with the colour of the coming day. Fascinated, he watched the colour deepen and creep across the sky. The lights along the river were dimmer now, and the sinister gray of the night was giving way to a softer shade.

The dawn crept along the river to him, just as he had watched Sansi creep to his bedside in the olden days when she had imagined him to be sleeping; a dawn of infinite calm.

He walked rapidly back to the studio, conscious of the chill which comes with daybreak.

And later, when the dawn had followed him into the studio, he commenced to paint; for work is not a curse as the old Jewish myth would have us believe—it is the greatest sedative in the world.

Hours later he was still working when Trollope found him. And the old painter, after a careful look, was of opinion that the hills in the background of Oliver's picture were too sombre—'just the least little bit in the world too sombre,' he had said.

After Trollope had left him Oliver went on with his work. Lunch came and still he continued; it was not until nearly four o'clock that his overtaxed powers gave way. He became aware of his utter exhaustion, and turning to the panacea of Bohemia, made himself coffee. Mrs Scott had come in as usual in the morning, but he had sent her away; the studio was, in consequence, very untidy. No meal there was possible, and Oliver was very conscious that he wanted a meal. It was his dominant need at the moment. It is a little sad to reflect that even when desperately in love, a man's prime need may be stomachic . . . a little sad and a little comforting.

He went to the café in the King's Road, where he made an excellent meal, to the surprise of the waiter, who, used as he was to the vagaries of Chelsea, was not accustomed to serving very solid meals at half-past four.

Repletion brought a physical contentment, but with it, since merely the cruder desires were satisfied, came melancholy.

The correct procedure for an Englishman under these circumstances is to get decently drunk, and, while Bacchus smiles, assure himself that the frown on the fair face of Venus is of no moment. But Oliver was not an Englishman . . . and after a night spent in twining the vine leaves in one's hair, there is always the morning of disillusion.

Oliver knew.

It was impossible for him to paint any more that day, and whilst he was wondering miserably what to do, Sankey entered the café.

'My dear Darnell, this is well met . . .'

Oliver smiled. On the whole, he welcomed Sankey's arrival, and the new-comer joined him at his table.

'Your smile is not a happy one, Darnell. I hope nothing is wrong?'

Oliver shrugged his shoulders, but made no other reply.

'A mood, my friend, a mood. Moods are the curse of the artist. I, myself, am damnably moody. Ah, the menu. Depart, Jules, and come again in yet a little while. I would ponder.'

The waiter grinned and left them. He knew Sankey of old, and was quite safe in permitting himself the grin.

'Darnell, I am what is known as stony. I am also hungry, most damnably. You are a man of lucre. The inference, I think, is obvious.'

'Quite,' said Oliver. 'Go ahead, Sankey. You are a logician.'

'I *think*, we had better make this a kind of hybrid meal. I need a pot of tea . . . a little weakness of mine, Darnell, one, alas, of many little weaknesses. And also I need sustenance of a character not normally associated with tea. A steak . . . slightly underdone, and chip potatoes with a crisp roll and butter—a crisp roll, mind, none of those damnably soft ones with crusts of india-rubber—and then I think we will consider our position. Jules! Hither!'

The order was given with minute directions and a mellowness of diction which amused both the host and the waiter, especially the waiter.

'I cannot talk at all freely whilst I eat. You will forgive me? That varlet tarries overmuch. . . . By the way, Darnell, the art of letters in this country is not one for gentlemen. No!'

'Oh, why? This is sad news.'

'It is commercialised. Damnably. The taste of the modern editor is too utterly low, too *bestial*, for words. They demand hog-wash, Darnell, demand it with enormously strident tongues. Send them a good story—I mean a *good* story, and they regret, *regret*, my dear Darnell, that they are unable to use it. Last night, since my body craved the sustenance which your generosity is now about to provide for it, I wrote a story. A trifle of two thousand words, but *good*. To-day I took it to an editor. Under pressure he consented to read it. I was to call back in four hours. I called back. He had gone, leaving only a note, a polite little note, a damnably polite little note, expressing his regret. I would tell you the story. But here is Jules. You will excuse me? From each according to his means, to each according to his needs. My needs are great at the moment. Jules, sauce.'

'Yes, sir!'

'No, not the thin sauce, the brown, thick kind. . . . Ah, that's better. Darnell, perhaps you will smoke. I have no cigarettes to offer you . . . alas!'

He attacked the beefsteak and the potatoes, and for a while he devoted almost all his attention to his food.

'Give man but food, and he can stand anything,' he said in an interlude. 'The old Romans knew, food and circuses. You note the order? This steak is most damnable good. . . . The cook here is capable of art. . . . A delightful art, cooking.'

The steak and the chip potatoes disappeared. Sankey demanded more hot water and refused any further food since, he said, it would spoil his dinner.

'That was a strange thing you said just now, Sankey, about a man standing anything if he has but food.'

'You've never been hungry, you've never, I mean, actually wanted food without being able to obtain it?'

'No!'

'I have, often. I tell you, my dear Darnell, that if a man is hungry, what he wants is food; nothing else counts. It is a pity, but it is true. It's contrary to all romance . . . perhaps one could wish it otherwise; but it is true!'

'I think a man may want other things more.'

'You have not been hungry. You do not know. You will forgive my being dogmatic. But I *know*.'

He was smoking one of Oliver's cigarettes and exhaled the smoke slowly, watching it curl upwards, extracting the very last shred of enjoyment from it. A faint flush suffused his thin, sallow cheeks, but his dark eyes were not so bright as when he had entered the restaurant. Darnell was watching his handsome, careless face.

'It is degrading, this struggle for the necessities of life,' Sankey said, after a pause which, for him, was long. 'In any decently organised existence these things

would be provided; the struggle which would keep us alive would be for the higher things, to excel in the arts, and so on. As it is, we find artists compelled to join in the ugly scramble which is life . . . to join in, or die.'

'There are things which all men struggle for that are every bit as instinctive as food,' Oliver said. 'I cannot conceive a state in which we should not struggle for them.'

'For a woman? That is so. But it proves what I have been saying. In modern life that struggle is artificially limited. The poor man is terribly handicapped; excepting he choose the most ordinary of women another man who has money beats him. So long as a man has money he may have the soul of a gorilla, and the morals of a rat, but he will find that many women will smile on him, beautiful women who would have beautiful children had they a decent life-partner. The sacrifice of beauty on the altar of mammon is one of the most appalling results of a society organised on a basis which is worse than that of the jungle.'

'It is not only poor men who are beaten,' Oliver said.

'Yes, but a man with money has a *chance*,' the other insisted.

'Not always. Not always for the woman he wants.'

'Ah! Then the woman's choice comes in. If I were turned down by a girl because she preferred another man, preferred him as a *man*, I mean, not because he had money, I would take it cheerfully. The better man had won . . . that is human and understandable.' Sankey was thoughtful awhile before he continued, 'I do love a woman . . . she will not marry me. Why? Because I have no money. There is no other reason. It is damnable.'

'A little money is desirable, particularly in a woman's eyes,' Oliver suggested.

'I'm not blaming her, not a bit. She would be a fool to marry me. I condemn society, Darnell, for making no provision for genius. . . . Pork-butchers, stockbrokers, these are taken to her breast. The poet, the painter, unless they give her their souls, are spurned.'

'It is very sad!'

'Sad! It is damnable. Damnable. But still, I do the work I wish to do; I follow my own sweet way. There are times when I am forced to bend the knee, since man must eat. My head is bloody but unbowed—an over-valued phrase and not as good as a dozen others of Henley—but, on the whole, I do the work I like . . . and somehow I live . . . that is the oddest thing about it, I sometimes think.'

'You find solace in your work?'

'Assuredly. Without it—work which may never even achieve publication—I should have rent asunder the veil by this time. Alone it makes life bearable. But I weary you, Darnell, with my lamentations, and unless I opine wrongly, you are already a little . . . melancholy.'

'Damnably!' said Oliver, with a smile, adopting Sankey's word.

'I am sorry,' the other replied. 'You are the sort of man who should not be miserable.'

'I think you are right about work, Sankey,' Oliver said, in an attempt to revert to the previous subject.

'I'm sure I am . . .'

'I wish I were always sure of my opinions, like you.'

'In most men that would be sarcasm. You seem to mean it.'

'I do,' replied Oliver. 'I am never sarcastic. By the way, if you are really hard up, I will lend you a little money.'

Sankey made no reply. The statement was too

astounding. There were a few men in London from whom he was able to borrow half a crown upon occasion, but only a few, and they, sooner or later he knew, would develop a certain reluctance which would gradually harden into permanent refusal.

Oliver lent him five pounds.

Sankey, for the first time in his life, was utterly without words.

'You *are* a queer cuss,' he said at length. 'Hang it all, you must dine with me this evening.'

'I shall be happy,' said Oliver. 'Your talk has helped me more than you know.'

Oliver became more and more grateful to Sankey, as the evening went by, for his invincible cheerfulness and for the scraps of queer, personal philosophy with which he interspersed his talk. With all Sankey's weaknesses (and judged by certain standards he fell lamentably short), he had a point of view, an outlook on life coloured by failure and disappointment, a nature which responded to kindness as readily as a child's.

After dinner they went to the Esoteric Club, where Oliver listened to streams of amusing talk which apparently could be continued indefinitely. Sankey became so involved, and Oliver so interested, in an argument with an excitable gentleman who had a pleasant but vague accent, and whose face betrayed his membership of the subtlest race in the world, that they accompanied the Semitic gentleman to his lodgings in an unsavoury alley off Oxford Street.

Here Sankey and Julowski drank stout and continued their argument, whilst Oliver listened. The stout was far too terrifying in appearance for him to drink.

It was late when they broke up, but when Oliver left his two friends at Hyde Park Corner, they were still talking.

A taxi took him as far as Chelsea Town Hall, from which he meant to walk along the river before he turned in. He was turning away when he heard his name.

It was Dulcie Whittingham who addressed him.

'Hallo, Mr Darnell!' she said. 'Isn't it a gorgeous night? I've been to see a new play . . . most awfully depressing. Ibsenish.'

'I've had rather an amusing evening. I've been with Sankey.'

'He hath his points,' she said, with a laugh. 'It seems altogether too delightful a night to turn in. Take me along by the river for half an hour. It will clear the morbid realism of that awful play out of my mind.'

Darnell hesitated, and the girl laughed.

'Even an unprotected male is safe on the Embankment,' she said.

'It wasn't that,' he replied. 'But I do not think that Hutton would like it.'

'I don't suppose he *would* be enthusiastic. He won't know. Really, you are not at all gallant. I wish to be escorted for a short distance along the river.'

'I shall be pleased,' he said.

'But not enthusiastic,' she laughed. She had fallen into step beside him.

'There's something mysterious about a great city at night,' she said. 'I've noticed it in several parts of the world. Is it so in your country?'

'Oh, yes. I think so. A vague feeling comes to one of a world in suspense.'

'But still, for all its mystery, for all its romance, London is no place to live in at this time of the year. I am going to Cornwall, almost at once. Usually I go much earlier than this.'

'I may not remain much longer in London either.'

'Oh ! I had looked on you as permanent almost as the lions in the Square.'

'Very few of us are permanent, I think.'

'You've a most intriguing—no, the word isn't used any more, is it? a most—I really don't know what other word to use, a most intriguing habit of talking cryptically.'

'I don't mean to. My respected grandfather does. And in proverbs.'

'Luen-chi?' she asked, and he wondered again that she should have remembered the name.

They came to the Embankment and wandered along it aimlessly. The moon was coming up shyly behind a bunch of tall, gaunt chimneys; a silver wisp of a moon.

'London can be very beautiful,' the girl said quietly. 'Let's sit here awhile.' She sat down as she spoke on a low seat they were passing.

'I wanted to see you again,' she said, after an interval of silence. 'Oliver, I am most awfully sorry over the other evening. I ought not to have returned to your studio. It was abominable of me.'

'I don't think that you should have,' he said. In an Englishman the words would have maddened her. From Oliver they seemed inevitable. It was exactly what he *did* think.

'You *are* a queer child,' she went on. 'It wasn't altogether my fault. I'm not blaming you in the least. What I mean is that I simply *had* to come back to you. All the evening I had been unable to get more than a casual word with you; goodness knows I tried hard enough.'

'But why should you want to talk to me particularly?'

'Why does one *ever* want to do these things, Oliver? I suppose that you think it very terrible that a girl should talk to you like this?' she added, after a pause.

'It does not seem . . . right. Yet somehow I am becoming used to Occidental manners and ideas.'

'I know it isn't according to the code of feminine conduct which exists in this country, or apparently to the one in your own. But I do as I wish. I recognise no code. Modern women don't. That's the chief value of being modern.'

'I sometimes think that *no* woman does, although most of them appear to.'

'The codes were nearly all made by men,' she commented.

'So you are a feminist?' he asked. 'I listened to one to-night . . . she was not like you, though.'

'God forbid!' she said, with a laugh. 'Most men would, in their hearts, have regarded my conduct as sporting, although they wouldn't like their own women to be the same. You seemed to regard it as too terrible for words. I'm so awfully sorry that you were upset.'

'I have the ideas of another civilisation . . . and the instincts of another race.'

'I know that,' she said softly. 'You have the soul of an Oriental, Oliver. It's very fascinating to a girl who is accustomed to men in some of whom the existence of a soul at all is . . . problematic.' She went on after a pause, 'You must forgive me, Oliver. I'm going away to Cornwall, almost at once, and when I come back I think I shall be married quite soon. Early in the autumn, anyway.'

'I am glad!' he said. 'You will be very happy, I do not doubt.'

'I wonder!' she said. 'Ronny's an awfully decent boy, and deserves a better woman than I am. But we had better be getting on.' She rose suddenly, as she finished speaking.

'You are very casual about your affections,' he said, as they walked along.

She laughed.

'I have only had one real love affair in my life,' she said. 'And I don't think my worst enemy would have accused me of being casual over that.'

'No?'

'No!' she laughed, and Oliver noticed a very odd quality in the laugh. 'I think the safest person to fall in love with is oneself,' she went on. 'It's usually the only romance which lasts. I think your friend Miss Halliday is an exceptionally pretty girl.'

Oliver started at the sudden introduction of Margaret's name, and the start was not lost on his companion.

'Yes,' he said, and then, as if conscious of the inadequacy of his reply, added, 'She is the best girl I have ever met!'

A frown crossed his face. He knew that his words had not exactly expressed his thought; most linguists are aware of the difficulty which is more common among them than among people who have but one tongue. The girl who was watching noticed the frown; and misunderstood it.

'You seem a little annoyed that I speak of her,' she said.

'No, it is not so. I was thinking of her, too.'

'Um! Well, anyway, she has an enthusiastic champion in you.'

'She has no need of a champion. I almost wish she had,' he said simply.

Dulcie smiled; it is difficult for a woman in love with a man to be charitable . . . especially to the man himself.

'I shall begin to think that you are in love with her, Oliver.'

'So?'

'I hate that word on your lips. It's absolutely meaningless.'

'But you are not seriously asking me if I am in love with her, surely?'

'Of course not. I mentioned her name quite casually in the first place.'

They came to Dulcie's studio.

'You'd better come in for ten minutes. I'm going to make myself coffee and I'll give you a cup. I promise not to bite you, or ill-treat you in any way.'

He laughed, and followed her into the studio.

She flung the cloak she had been wearing across a chesterfield, and he saw that she was in evening dress, a little black frock of the simple, carefully-designed, expensive type.

'Sit down. I won't be a minute, and then you'll have to cut away, for it's getting late.'

When the coffee was made she sat on the flat top of the oak fender opposite to him.

'You are depressed, Oliver,' she said suddenly, and he recognised a new seriousness in her. 'You were depressed when you met me, and you have the air of a man who has been depressed for some time. If you think I can help you in any way, you may tell me what's wrong. You've only seen one side of my character so far. I should like to show you that I can be a pal if it is necessary. Women of my type very often can.' A wistful note had come into her voice.

'Thank you very much,' he said. 'But you cannot help me.'

'Ah, well, buck up, Oliver! I once read of an old priest who had a wonderful phrase, "Nothing human need appal!" I always think of those words when I am down.'

'It is almost a pity they aren't true,' said Oliver, who was surprised that she had sensed his mood with such insight. 'Human things do appal . . . unless one has absolute faith, and in modern life absolute faith is rare.'

There came a knock at the studio door.

'Who on earth is that?' Dulcie asked. 'Wait a minute. I'll just see. Who's there?' she called at the door.

'It's I . . . Ronald. I saw you were up as I was going home . . .'

She opened the door.

'Come in, Ronny,' she said. 'Mr Darnell is here. He met me at the Town Hall, and brought me home. I'm just giving him coffee. You shall have some too.' She spoke with a calculated calm which veiled her nervousness.

Hutton glanced sharply from one to the other.

'I've just had coffee. You're jolly late back, Dulcie, aren't you?'

She bridled at his tone.

'I've been talking to Mr Darnell for some time,' she said.

'I don't think that Mr Darnell understands some of our English customs,' Hutton said, and, as he spoke, his eyes were on Oliver's.

'I'm afraid I don't,' said Oliver, who was greatly distressed at the turn events had taken. He appreciated the delicacy and danger of the situation which had so suddenly arisen.

'I asked Mr Darnell to come into my studio,' Dulcie said. 'So I'm afraid that any lack of knowledge is on my part.' The emphasis and the meaning behind the words were clear and indicated a rupture which Oliver was determined should not take place.

'It isn't fair, Dulcie!' Hutton burst out. 'You're too casual . . .' He pulled himself up short.

'It is true what Miss Whittingham says, that she asked me to her studio'—Oliver was speaking calmly—'but she did so, as you say, casually, out of politeness. She was obviously surprised when I accepted her

lightly-given invitation. But I had reasons for so doing.'

'What do you mean?' This from Hutton, who was obviously desperately keeping his temper.

'I meant to ask her to marry me. She has refused. I was just going when you came. . . . Miss Whittingham could not very well give you this explanation, so I do.'

The lie was told unemotionally, and with the grave assurance of the East. Whatever surprise it called up in Dulcie was not apparent, and, womanlike, she instantly grasped the new situation.

'I don't see that you were entitled to any explanation, Ronny,' she said. 'Your instincts come from the time when a woman was a man's property.'

She was dignified and indignant; and completely mistress of the situation.

'*I am* an ass!' he said. 'Still, I think most men would have jumped to the same conclusion that I did. You *are* casual, Dulcie . . . and jolly careless.'

'It's just as well that you found it out, Ronny, I think,' she said. 'Besides, you do not keep the arrangement we made about our individual liberty.'

'I think I will go now,' said Oliver. 'Good-night, both of you.'

Dulcie came to the door, and there the two shook hands.

'Good luck . . . whatever happens,' she said, 'and thank you,' she added.

Once he was alone, Oliver was conscious of the depression which the somewhat hectic evening he had spent had kept at bay. Life appeared to him to be without climax, without object, as futile as it had seemed when he had paced up and down his studio in the hours before the dawn.

But he was also conscious of great physical exhaustion, and knew that sleep was hovering near him. He let

himself into his silent studio, and even as he prepared for bed he was half dazed with the want of sleep.

Fitful dreams came to him during the night, and once or twice he was awake.

Dreams of Margaret, Margaret ahead of him, beckoning to him, but always receding. . . . Margaret elusive, lost to him, intangible as a mist.

But when Mrs Scott came in the morning he was heavily asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

MARGARET WEEPS

DURING the week which followed, Oliver kept away from the flat at Richmond. On most of the days he went to the riverside town and wandered about the terrace and the river, hoping, and yet fearing, that he would meet Margaret. As the days went by the hopelessness of his love for her became more and more incontestable. There had been that in her pity, when she refused him, which was utterly final, and yet deep down in his consciousness he believed that she was fond of him, at least as fond of him as she was of Morden.

The first news he had of her was from Northboro'.

His grandmother's letter told him that Trollope had been down to see them, and obviously the old painter had made a deep impression on her. He was a professing Christian (the old lady said); and it was desirable in every way that poor Margaret should have met him. They were all infinitely obliged to Oliver for bringing the meeting about, but Mrs Darnell saw in it the hand of God. She agreed with Trollope that until her marriage Margaret should reside with him. Philippa would miss her a great deal, but Margaret's duty was obvious. . . .

Oliver could easily imagine that his aunt's sentiments were described with great moderation by the old lady.

'Until her marriage!'

Oliver pondered on the words. His grandmother had spoken as if the event were a settled matter. He read the letter again. Mrs Darnell might also have meant to refer to the event as a contingency which

would one day arise in the natural order of things. In the end he was quite uncertain what his grandmother meant; he was in the mood when a man twists sentences and distorts meanings. Obviously the thing to do was to drop into Trollope's studio and find out what was happening.

Trollope was alone when Oliver found him, and his usually neat studio was in a state of considerable disorder.

'I'm moving!' he announced.

'My grandmother told me as much in her letter. Margaret is to go with you . . . I am glad.'

'Yes . . . I can hardly believe it true after all these years of loneliness.'

Trollope mopped his forehead.

'Moving is the devil, though,' he said. 'I don't like my pictures packed by careless people. I wondered if you would come in. Mix me a whisky and soda, Oliver, if you love me. I am in sore need.'

'That's better!' the old painter said, when he had drunk. 'I will rest awhile. One should never work after whisky. You look a bit down in the mouth, Oliver. What's wrong?'

Oliver shrugged his shoulders.

'I do not like London, I think,' he said.

'It's not a bad place. If I were young I wouldn't stop in it, though . . . it's a microcosm, but it isn't the world by a long chalk.'

'I shall be leaving it soon.'

'That's a pity in some ways; you've not been here long enough. . . . You've never really settled down to work, though, since you've been here. Why is it?'

'It is a city of disturbing influence.'

'Yes. I remember your saying so before. But surely you've adjusted yourself to it? Surely the ideas you

brought with you from Luen-chi's garden have been modified ?'

'In a sense they have . . . but I'm interrupting your packing.'

'There's no hurry, anyway I can pack with you here. I wish you would tell me what's upsetting you. It isn't morbid curiosity on my part, as you know. And I'm more or less responsible to Airlee for you, quite apart from the fact that I happen to like you.'

'I am very miserable.'

Trollope grunted sympathetically.

'My mixed blood is a curse,' Oliver went on. 'I am in love; if it were not for my lack of nationality I believe I should have a chance.'

'You have your work, your genius,' the other said uneasily.

Oliver had not noticed it, but Trollope's whole manner was uneasy.

'But I cannot work without . . .' Oliver's words died away.

'Margaret . . . I know,' the old painter said with infinite sympathy. 'It is bad luck . . . if you will listen to an old man, Oliver, to one who has suffered in his time, I will tell you something which I believe to be true. Work *is* important, it does compensate, at least to a great extent. I know words are easy, but I believe these to be true.'

'But why should the Chinese blood in me prove such a terrible handicap?'

'I do not know; it does, though. You simply must recognise the fact. If you had children, Oliver, even by a white wife, they might quite easily be strikingly Chinese. You cannot reasonably expect that it should not prove a drawback in an English girl's eyes. I am terribly sorry for you, but I should not be your friend if I told you otherwise.'

'Margaret has talked to you of me?'

'That is not a fair question.' The old painter looked at Darnell, and Oliver recognised the sympathy in the voice and eyes.

'No,' he said, 'it isn't.'

'I wish I could help you. . . . The human heart possesses amazingly recuperative powers. A tragedy at your age is often a pale, wistful memory at mine. I know how indecently easy it is to talk, though.'

'But you see the unfairness of it all,' Oliver burst out. 'I cannot help my origin . . .'

'I do see the unfairness. But I can also quite understand why Margaret does not marry you. I cannot see that such a marriage holds in it the promise of happiness either for you or her. It is damnable that it should be so, but it is. Race instinct is one of the strongest instincts, and you are very badly up against it.'

'But in appearance I am English.'

'In appearance only, Oliver. Your genius, your brain, your whole outlook on life is not of my country.'

'But why should you be so certain that such a marriage is doomed to failure?'

'Because in practice they nearly always are. It is a question of children. Ultimately all marriages are a question of children, if the wife is a woman at all and not a parasite . . .'

'Children need not enter into the question.'

'They are bound to. . . . From the little I know of Margaret she belongs definitely to the one type of woman which matters, the mother type. You, the Chinese part of you, at least, are aware of the overwhelming importance of this matter of children.'

'But why cannot love be enough? Why cannot man be an end in himself, why this perpetual sacrifice to the next generation?'

'Why cannot man be an end in himself?' Trollope

repeated Oliver's question. 'Simply because he isn't. He is either a link . . . or abortive. There are women who regard their tiny lives as ends, who take to their puny selves the finality which is divine . . . you can see them in every street in London, shrivelled and shrunken, their faces hectic with the eternally unsatisfied desire for happiness. Margaret is not of those, thank God !'

'Then you, Trollope, would be sorry to see her marry me?'

'I have not been consulted.'

'You don't answer my question.'

'Why raise it, Oliver? You know that from my heart I wish you well. . . . I cannot approach the question from any point of view except Margaret's, though.'

'I see that you would be sorry.'

'The one thing I wish for is her happiness, Oliver. My own happiness—or yours—is as nothing compared with Margaret's. You have youth and your work. . . . I think if you really loved her, you too would have in mind only her happiness, but the love of youth is, in the very nature of things, selfish.'

'All love is!' said Oliver bluntly. 'Even yours. It is not peculiar to youth.'

'I do not follow you, Oliver.'

'You wish for Margaret's happiness for therein you will find your own . . .'

'That, I suppose, is true. But it applies with equal force to a mother's love for her babe which is, one understands, the highest type of love, the one absolutely unselfish thing in life.'

'It is instinctive!' said Oliver. 'Shared with the animals. I loathe instinctive things. . . . Race-instinct and all the others. But I must become reconciled . . .' he added in a calmer tone.

'Why not try Paris for a while?' Trollope asked.
'I could help you there. You would love the Quarter.'
He was striving desperately to be of help to Oliver.

'No, I shall not go to Paris.'

'You might easily work better there,' Trollope urged.

'I think I shall return to China and stay a while
there . . .'

'These are things a man must settle for himself,' the
old painter said, with a sigh. 'God knows, Oliver, if I
could have willed things otherwise, I would have gladly
done so.'

'Yes, I feel that. . . . I am disappointed, though,
that you, too, share the common prejudice about race.
With the exception of the Chinese and the Jews there
is *no* pure race. The English are a mixture of many
peoples. A nation is an artificial thing, a thing which
can be modified. . . . This taboo, because I have
Chinese blood in my veins is beyond my comprehension.
I am at least as proud of Luen-chi as I am of Mrs
Darnell . . .'

'I'm afraid that all the argument in the world, Oliver,
does not affect one's belief in the instinctive things.'

Oliver rose to go.

'Good-bye,' he said, and for a moment the eyes of
the two men met.

'Good-bye, and God bless you, Oliver!' The old
painter's voice trembled as he was speaking. 'I, too,
have suffered,' he said. 'I understand . . .'

Once his mind was made up, Oliver was calmer.
From Trollope's studio he went to Richmond.

The little town was full of people, most of them in
summer clothes, and the place had the air of a seaside
town. He stood a while on the bridge watching the
boats go up-stream, and a little smile flitted across his
face when he noticed Moppitup teaching a callow youth
to punt.

He knocked at the door of the flat, and again experienced the sense of exhilaration which had come to him when last he knocked at it. But it was momentary only, and almost before he was aware, the door was open and Margaret was standing before him.

'I'm glad you're in,' he said, after the greeting. He spoke casually, easily.

'Come inside,' Margaret said. 'Sophy will be in in a few minutes.'

He followed her into the big living-room overlooking the river, and when she was seated he sat in the big chesterfield in the window.

'I've come to say good-bye, Margaret,' he announced.

'Are you . . . going away?'

'Yes . . . to China, and then to Toyama, I think.'

'I don't quite know what to say, Oliver. I'm glad, if it will be for your good.'

'I do not like London.'

Something in his face broke down her reserves.

'Oliver,' she burst out. 'I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry, I wouldn't have upset your work and your life like this for worlds. You will believe that, won't you?'

'Yes.' He met her waiting eyes as he spoke. 'I know it. I shall have only the memories of a good woman when I think of you, of the best woman I have ever met.'

'I have tried to be fair, to do what was best,' she said miserably.

'You will be happy, Margaret,' he said. 'The English boy will be a good man. I, who envy him, say so. For me, I go back to China, to my own people . . . and to my work.'

'I thought I had my work once,' she said. 'But I didn't get anywhere with it. Your work—a man's work—seems so much more important, doesn't it?'

He made a little gesture with his hands, which she

had often noticed before, but which she had never understood.

'Yes, there is always work,' he said.

'You will write to me, Oliver?'

'You wish it?'

'Of course I do. I shall follow your career with enormous interest . . . and shall be proud of being your friend.'

'Then I will write, Margaret . . .'

A silence followed his words. It was the girl who broke it.

'I shall often think of the talks we have had together, Oliver. In Northboro' and on the river. I shall never forget that day in Limehouse, when I went to look for copy and found none, and all those funny little children.'

'Poor little beggars!'

'They seemed happy enough.'

'All children are happy, Margaret. Even race-instinct cannot make half-caste children unhappy.'

'Of course not . . .' She was conscious of blundering in speaking of the visit to Limehouse, and the consciousness was shown by the faint flush which had come to her face.

'May I make you some tea, Oliver? I expected Sophy in before this.'

'Please no, I must be going in a minute. But I couldn't go without saying good-bye to you.'

'Of course not!'

'We shall probably never meet again, Margaret. You will think sometimes of me, think, sometimes, that I loved you . . .'

She was silent.

'I will go now,' he said, rising.

In the hall he paused and held out his hand.

'Good-bye, Margaret!'

'Good-bye . . .' Her voice trembled, and he saw

that tears were near her eyes. He knew that for him she had nothing but pity, yet the brightness in her eyes which was almost tears, was of infinite comfort to him.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. There was something intensely un-English in the action.

He opened the door and on the threshold turned to her again. The sunlight from a window in the roof caught her head and shoulders, and he looked long and intently at her, as if he were stamping her face on his memory for ever. Then, without a word, he turned away.

She remained standing where he had left her until his footsteps had died into silence. Very quietly she shut the door.

An hour later when Sophy found her, her eyes were red and swollen with tears.

CHAPTER XVII

GIFTS

FINALITY is calming, it is suspense—hope, if you will—which breaks the soul.

After his last interview with Margaret, Darnell looked at the world with level eyes. The certainty which had come to him destroyed the unrest, the wild striving which had urged him to cling to hope whilst a shred of hope remained. It was almost possible for him, in his new mood, to think tolerantly of the world's judgment, certainly he did so without the old rasping irritation. That, in the main, it *was* the world's judgment which had condemned him, he was reluctantly coming to see; that it was unjust, based on instinct as distinct from reason, was of less moment to him than that it was final. He knew the worst that Fate could do to him. The last look in Margaret's eyes, that look of infinite compassion which he would treasure to the end, finished for all time the vague hope which had wrung his soul.

He glanced gravely at the river, and on the Richmond side he met Moppitup, who was leaving the inn there. Moppitup changed the action of wiping the back of his hand across his lips to a salute.

'Going on, sir?' he asked hopefully.

'No.'

Moppitup achieved half a crown, saluted again, and, quite innocently and naturally, returned to the inn. Oliver passed on. An odd thought struck him that Moppitup was a much happier man than he was. It opened up a new train of thought in Darnell's mind, a dangerous train which ended with Airlee.

'No!' he said to himself, 'that would justify the world's verdict.'

He went back to his studio, where he packed the few things which were necessary (and in spite of civilisation they are few, really) and a few treasures. There was no photo of Margaret . . . he had never possessed nor desired one, for she was vivid in his subconsciousness and sprang into his vision when he willed.

There was a volume of *Omar* she had given him, a tiny, leather-bound volume with her name written in the front, 'Margaret.' In her neat hand she had written 'from' in front of the name when she had given it to him.

Darnell had read the little book many times, particularly some of the verses which were marked, whether or not by Margaret he was uncertain. He read the marked verses again . . . and wondered, with a flicker of a smile, why some of dear God-forsaken old Omar's thoughts had been marked. Perhaps because they were so abysmally untrue. . . .

But an unmarked verse caught his eye :—

'The worldly hope men set their hearts upon
Turns ashes—or it prosters; and anon,
Like snow upon the desert's dusty face,
Lighting a little hour or two—is gone.'

He read it again slowly before he put the tiny book into his suit-case, which he closed with an odd feeling of comfort.

Sankey was knocking at his door as he opened it.

'I'm going to the 'phone,' Oliver explained, and together they went to the little grocer's shop a hundred yards or so away where was the nearest telephone.

'I want to return to China,' Oliver said, when he had achieved the wanted number; 'when does the next

boat sail? To-morrow? Yes. I will come straight to your office now. Yes. A state-room. . . . At eleven-thirty from Charing Cross. . . . Thank you!'

'Is this a joke?' Sankey demanded, when Oliver had replaced the receiver.

'No. I do not joke with steamship companies. A limited liability company has no sense of humour.'

'But you are not *seriously* going back to China?'

'Seriously . . . yes, quite seriously, Sankey.'

'I've never noticed before, Darnell, how Eastern your face is sometimes.'

'Sometimes. I catch the eleven-thirty from Charing Cross. The *Queen of the East* goes out on the morning tide apparently. There is a nice sound about going out on the morning tide.'

'But why? Trollope has been raving about you. You were to be *the* sensation . . .'

'Poor old Trollope; he is very enthusiastic.'

'Yes, but he's right. Your work is wonderful.'

'I can paint in China, though.' His face was an impenetrable reserve.

'You're too deep for me, Darnell. I shall miss you very much.'

Sankey spoke with obvious sincerity, and Oliver's features relaxed slightly into a smile.

'I am glad you will miss me,' he said. 'Even a half-caste likes to be missed.'

'That be damned . . . what does nationality matter? The old idea that an Englishman is as good as six Frenchmen and God only knows how many niggers is exploded.'

'Not quite,' said Oliver.

'Among cultured people anyway.'

'No, not even among cultured people. We'll get a taxi here . . .'

Neither man spoke much during the ten minutes it

took for the taxi to whisk them to the big steamship office, and Oliver had no difficulty in his arrangements for the journey.

Afterwards they dined in the little restaurant where once Oliver had lunched with Margaret and Trollope. He wanted to occupy the same table, but a little Jewish gentleman with a flaxen-haired lady thirty years younger than himself were already there.

'I'm damned sorry you're going, Oliver,' Sankey said. 'Quite apart from the material benefit you have showered on my unworthy head. There is a reticence about you, a reserve which is charming, like all strange and mysterious things. After all, you haven't given London a very great chance, you know. It can be very beastly indeed to a poor devil like me, but for a man like you, it has its points. And even I occasionally sell a manuscript. . . .'

'I have my studio for nine months yet. Perhaps you would care to use it?'

'Me? My dear chap, I'm living in one room at the top of a beastly alley off St Martin's Lane, and even there I'm under notice to quit.'

'Then you will find the studio useful. You will find an inventory of the things which belong to the landlord . . . the rest you are welcome to. I do not want them. So it is not kindness on my part.'

'Are you serious? There isn't some elaborate joke behind all this?'

'No!' Oliver replied. 'I am very serious.'

The moonstruck expression on the other's face made him smile.

'It'll be rather a joke . . . Sankey installed in a gorgeous studio. Seriously, I may be able to work there. . . . The garret of the proverbial starving genius is a most horribly uninspiring place in which to write, particularly the light, cheerful, banal stuff which sells.'

'You had better come back with me. I have still a little packing to do, and I will break the news to Mrs Scott, the woman who looks after the place.'

'Rather. I shall see you off at Charing Cross as well.'

A quarter past eleven found the two men at the station.

There was a crowd similar to the one which Oliver had found there when first he set foot in London. Around him the atmosphere seemed tense with restrained British emotion. Here and there, in the electric light, a woman's white face spoke of deeper things.

'Well, good-bye, Oliver,' Sankey was saying. 'Some day we shall meet again . . .'

But all the poet saw was the calm, excluding smile. 'I should like to meet you again,' was what Oliver said.

There was a blowing of whistles and the train moved. It slid out of the station, leaving behind on the platform a strange assortment of humanity and emotions.

Outside, in the darkness, the train bore Oliver across the light-spangled river, and was gathering speed in the depressing inner suburbs which the night was mercifully hiding under its cloak.

Dawn found him on board the mighty boat which would bear him back to the land whence he had come, and where Sansi was, and Luen-chi, and Luen-chi's garden . . . and Toyama. As he watched the turmoil around him settle slowly down into order, he was awed by the sense of inevitability, of sheer power, which radiated from some unseen, mysterious centre. There was evidence of a central, controlling intelligence, to which the great ship responded. Outside, in the gray, cold world—from the steamer all was cold and gray

and echoing—he had striven to see evidence of any such intelligence. His grandmother in Northboro', and old Luen-chi had, in their widely differing ways, assured him of the existence of such an intelligence. . . .

But here on the steamer he could *see* the evidence, appreciate the firm exactness which was behind it all.

It seemed to Oliver a long time before they started, before England began to recede from the boat. Once they were under way he went below. When next he came on deck all that he could see of England was a smoke-blue on the horizon, a blur at the base of the empty sky.

Ahead of him were the peace and untroubled thought of the old days, and there, weeks later, he found Sansi and his father waiting.

Sansi ran down to the little car which had brought him . . . all the reserve of her race abandoned.

'My lil Ol-liv-er!' she cried. 'My lil Ol-liv-er!' She was dressed in a robe of gorgeous blue and black and silver, and in her raven hair were the jade ornaments Oliver had loved.

In her eyes were tears.

'My lil Ol-liv-er!' she repeated time and again, even when they were all safe in the living-room of the big white house.

His father grinned nervously with emotion, but strove, in the manner of his race, to appear unemotional.

Luen-chi was not there, but had sent a message that he would await Oliver in his garden in the evening.

And there in the twilight hour, when Luen-chi's wonderful garden was most wonderful, his grandson found him and made obeisance before his respected grandfather, which is the manner of *his* race.

'I am returned,' he said in Chinese.

'It is good!' the old man replied. 'If you have gathered wisdom in your travels . . .'

'I think I am wiser, my respected grandfather.'

'So?'

'I think so.'

'You have painted great pictures?' Luen-chi was watching his grandson from between eyelids which were mere slits.

'I did not do much work in London, I do not like London.'

'So? You like my garden?' Eagerness in the voice belied the immobility of the face.

'It is the most beautiful thing in the world,' Oliver said. He had donned Chinese attire in his grandfather's honour, and had Sankey seen him at the moment he would have been even more amazed than he had been in the little Soho restaurant by the Oriental in Oliver's face.

'Then you shall paint your pictures in my garden,' the old man said.

'The goodness of my respected grandfather overcomes me.'

'You will find naught here that disturbs, my son. Truth may be in a garden hiding away from the world, and in contemplation you may find her. Who shall say?'

The old man clapped his hands and silent-footed servants appeared in the old magical way. With the tea the ceremonial greetings were over, and for a while in the gathering evening light Oliver talked with his grandfather.

'You did well to come back to my garden,' Luen-chi said, when they parted that evening.

And in the garden Oliver painted his pictures, and in its sedative calm the wound in him healed. He heard sometimes from Margaret in England, sometimes from his grandmother.

But it was in Sansi's house that he painted his great picture.

It was the face of a girl, an English girl, and Sansi watched it with growing wonder. She only partly understood the wondering, wistful light in the girl's eyes.

'She is pretty, Ol-liv-er,' Sansi would say, as she sat watching her son work. 'But so pretty!'

And months afterwards the picture came to Trollope's house in London, a few days before Margaret and Bobby Morden were to be married.

The old painter and his niece were standing watching it.

'It is a great picture . . . a great picture, but I have never seen quite that look in your pretty eyes, Margaret. It reminds me of a little thing by Fra Angelica I saw in some Italian Gallery or other . . . a Madonna, I think.' Trollope spoke thoughtfully.

'Oliver may have seen it there, though,' the girl said quietly. Something in her voice caused the old painter to look down at her.

'Tears!' he said. 'This will never do, my pretty one. . . .'

'I can't help it, Troll,' she said. 'My few poor tears . . . what are they?'

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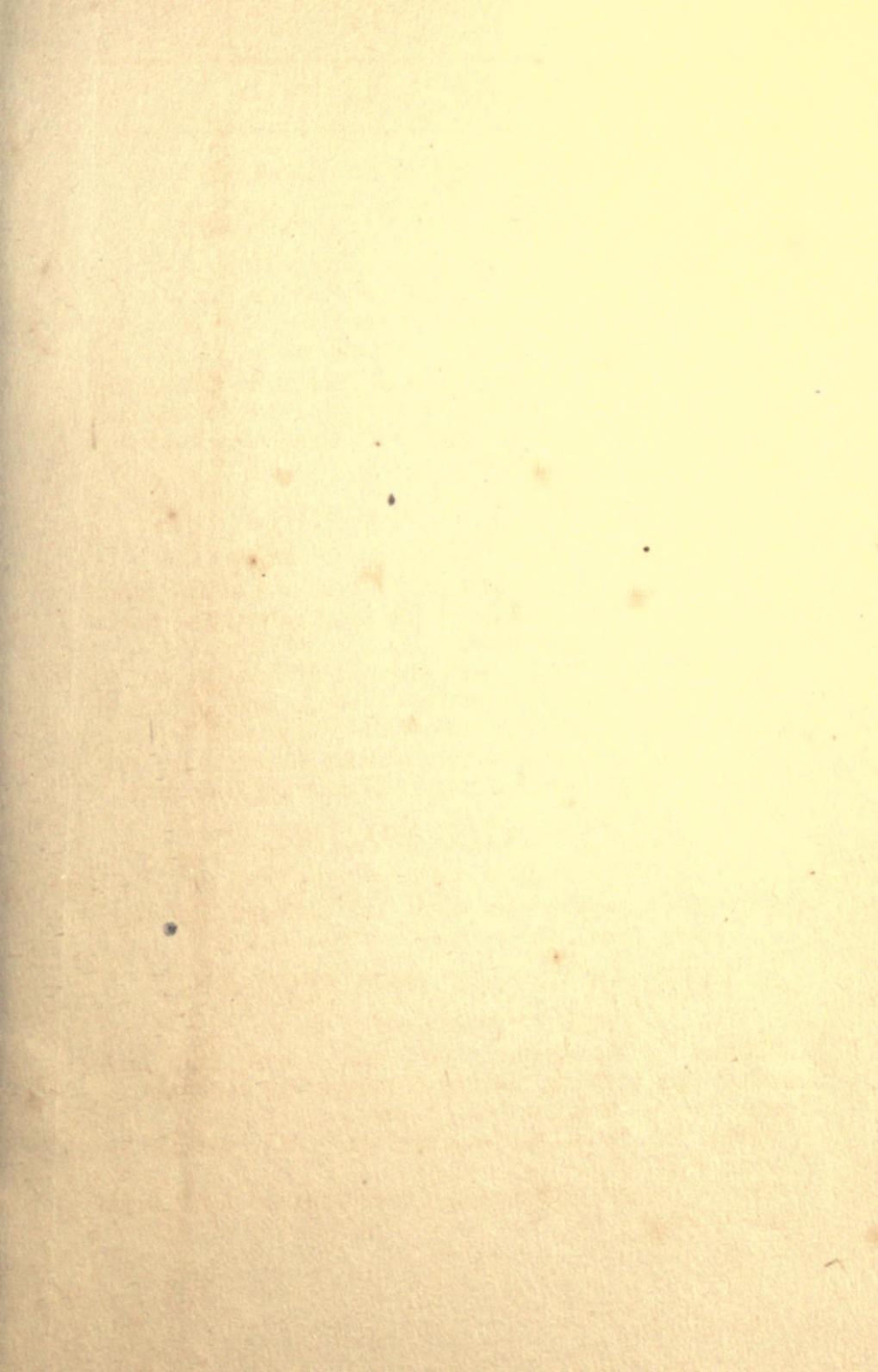
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